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Interview with Mrs. Bassett Ferguson (Mary Shallcross) on January 23, 1973
by Rebecca Button. The subject is Delaware in the 1880’s-1920’s.

Q This is an interview with Mary Shallcross Ferguson in her home in Newark, Delaware on January 23, 1973. Mrs. Bassett Ferguson was born as a centennial child in 1876. In her home over her mantle is a painting of Droyers-[sp] Creek as she remembers it, done by Mr. Copeland of Philadelphia--Arthur Copeland? This painting is a symbolic kind of picture for Mrs. Ferguson. She remembers her early life in Delaware very well.

A Let's say a word about this painting. It was a stream, Droyers Creek, where Father and I used to gun and fish. When I went into Mr. Copeland's studio one day to criticize what he'd done, I had asked him to paint three wild ducks out of gunshot because we never got those wild ducks. When we went fishing, when Father and I went fishing, we always took the gun along, hoping to get a railbird or something for Mother. She had a very poor appetite but would always eat a bird. So we were always hunting a bird for Mother and the gun went along with our fishing tackle.

Well, when I went in his studio, he had three ducks, but they were in the foreground, big as life. I said, "Oh, no. They were always out of gunshot." So I took his brush and put in three ducks in the background of the painting. Can you see them? And in the foreground is a lovely old tree. Under that tree we always caught catfish and yellow neds. And one day we were sitting there very quietly, here came a monstrosity. It looked like the daddy of all the sea serpents, and it was a big water snake with a huge bullfrog in his mouth. Daddy took his gun and shot the snake and the bullfrog jumped out, but his back was broken, so we couldn't let him go; we just took him home and ate him, for dinner.

Going on from this picture of fishing and gunning, at the first peep of spring, we were catching herring in the net set in the old gate hole. This was about three miles from Odessa, Delaware and five from Middletown. Then we were fishing with a line down in Droyers Creek. We always took the gun along, hoping for a bird. It was a peace offering to Mother, because she felt the time that we spent on fishing was more or less wasted because Father and I did spend a good deal of time. I now understand Mother's feeling. We'd go in the morning and Father would say, at lunch, "Let's keep something for supper. The moon will be up early tonight." Sometimes we'd stay until after dark on purpose to bob for eels. You make a bob by taking the body of a sparrow and sewing it through and through, many times, with floss silk. Tie it onto a four-inch string and then onto a short pole and plump it overboard. Do it quickly with a throwing motion. And the teeth of the eel catch in the floss silk momentarily. Soon the bottom of the boat was a squirming mass of eels. Then we went home. Father never took more game than could be used. I was taught that it was poor sportsmanship. Just like gathering wild flowers, take only a few if any. The traveling public have a right to enjoy them. I learned from Father to have great respect for growing things. We spent a great deal of time in a partnership with the Agricultural Department of Delaware College developing a tomato with less seed, a beet with a greater sugar content, sweet corn that had four ears to the stalk, a strawberry large as a small peach, sweet and meaty. I always helped with every exper-
iment. I met the agriculture professor from Delaware College and drove him the three miles to White Hall, the name of the farm where Father had a field of soil especially adapted to experiments. Some of the results were most gratifying: a ten-ounce tomato would have fourteen seeds; strawberries, unbelievable in size and delicious to eat; the tomato was named for Father. I've heard of farmers who sold the best and ate the rest. Not so at Bellview.

When fall came and old October was pretty nigh gone and the frost was coming on a little harder every day, the cellar for vegetables was being filled with turnips, cabbage, beets, sweet and white potatoes (There had to be a special place for sweet ones because they had to be kept warmer,) parsnips and so on. Out of that cellar came food for many. One year the mills closed down in New Castle and Father sent a two-horse wagonload of vegetables, apples and milk twice a week to the mill folk for free. At Christmas the baskets were filled from--partly from that cellar for the families living in tenement houses scattered about. I can still see the long table Father had set up in the dining room and the big empty baskets placed on it, one for each family. First in went either a turkey or a big chicken; next, candied vegetables, a loaf of bought bread--as great a treat as cake. The candy and nuts had been bought in quantity, candy by the tub and nuts by the half bushel. The money Father had earned picking out and selling to Philadelphia candy concerns black walnut kernals, His kernals were in demand for they were of high quality. But then he aimed for the best in everything produced. Your code was, "You do your best; you think the best; you gave your best."

The last ride I had with Father with his old horse Sadie and buggy, he told me it had been a good year and he had more to divide with a fellow who had less. I said impatiently, "Why do you always have to help the other fellow? Why not let him scurry for himself?" One of his truest sayings was my answer: "It is much easier to give than to have to take."

Also into that cellar went live rabbits to protect them from the colored people who would catch the last one. Father must have plenty of rabbits for the fall hunting. He always invited friends from New Castle, Delaware, and Philadelphia, the latter was president of the Pennsylvania Railroad and an oriental rug merchant. The latter, a Mr. Graham, was a very poor shot but he loved the day's outing. Father expected me to help always with his entertaining and the fun of the day. So I stuffed a rabbit's skin with straw and made eyes of black satin. It was put beside a haystack. When Mr. Graham's attention was called to the sitting rabbit, someone shouted, "Don't shoot it sitting. Wait until the beater scares it up." Mr. Graham, anxious not to miss, fired. The rabbit exploded, and so did those looking on. He never lived it down. There was a group of Philadelphia businessmen called the Asparagus Club. At their next luncheon they made sure of Mr. Graham's attendance and in the center of the table had a stuffed rabbit which they called the "Satan-eyed Rabbit."

This cellar was very deep, therefore like a refrigerator, even on summer days. The milk, cream and butter were all kept there. It was also called a cyclone cellar, and we'd huddle down there when there were bad thunderstorms. The men who turned the crank of the big ice cream freezer always made the ice cream down there in the cellar, much cooler. The cellar under
the living room had interesting creatures. The house was heated by coal stove, which heated two rooms, one above. That left the cellars cool or cold. In this cellar was the long bed of salt hay, cut down near Port Penn. In the late fall barrels and barrels of oysters came from Chincoteague and the Eastern Shore. They were spread out on the hay, then covered with more hay. Once a week this long bed of oysters and hay was sprinkled with salt water. You could hear the oysters snap their shells shut when they'd had enough to drink. In one corner of this cellar was a pen of diamondback terrapins, also red-bellied terrapins. When these terrapins stopped crawling and went completely into their shells, it was too cold for the oysters and they must have a thick layer of salt hay added to their bed covers. When there was a warm spell—it was much colder in those winters than it is now, because we had snow banks that lasted all winter—when there was a warmer spell, we'd get a message from the railroad station, "There are two or three or four barrels of oysters from Chincoteague [sp]." And these were put with the other oysters in the cellar.

When Mr. Benjamin Biggs was elected governor, Father gave a dinner for men to celebrate. I want to tell you something about how they used to have their meetings out there on the farm—the cause or political meetings. We were so far from everybody, our nearest neighbors a mile, that nobody could listen in to their proceedings, and they didn't know that a small girl was on the back steps of the dining room listening to everything that was said. Later, when women got the vote—and by the way, I didn't work for women to get the vote, I thought it would be better if they didn't have it—when women got the vote, I was the one who stood at the polls in Ridley Park to encourage women to come and vote. They would say, "No, I won't go to vote. I'll be the only woman there." And I would answer, "No, you won't. I'll be there." I remember Bassett bringing me sandwiches so that I could stay at the polls all day long to encourage other women to come and vote. As to Mr. Biggs, they had—oh, yes, I mustn't forget to tell you that the men always ended up by eating watermelon. Father raised huge watermelons, and they would cut them, and if they weren't quite up to par, well that one went out to the pigs, and then another watermelon was brought in by the colored man. Sometimes they'd cut a half a dozen watermelons, and the pigs would get them all before they got one that was just the right color and just the right taste. At this dinner, there were 112 men. Turkeys were farmed out by Mother to be roasted. Her friends had offered to help prepare the dinner. A gasoline stove was set up in one corner of the dining room, which was converted into a kitchen, the regular kitchen being too far away. Two women dipped and crumbed and fried oysters all the evening. After a while the quarts and quarts of raw oysters were no more. I was given two oyster knives, and with a colored man to help opened oysters in the cellar and kept the supply flowing. There were hundreds of beaten biscuits, bowls and bowls of chicken salad, and you'd be surprised at the item that was considered the most popular for dessert—bananas. Father had bought two big bunches and bananas were not as plentiful as they are now. They were a rare treat. And these piles of bananas all down the table were soon emptied, because the men ate what they could and put the rest in their pockets to take home to their wives. The tables were really loaded with food. And what was left over, many turkeys were not even carved, but Mother had arranged it that way because she wanted Mrs. Whitock to take a whole turkey
home; she wanted somebody else, Mrs. Woods, to have a turkey; she wanted plenty of chicken salad so she could send some to an invalid, and so there was enough food left over to supply the whole neighborhood. And it was all delivered by the different ones leaving with a bowl and a napkin over it—we didn't have paper napkins in those days—to take the food to somebody because they were not invited to the dinner. But the whole community had dinner that night in honor of Gov. Ben Biggs.

Right here I'd like to tell you about the big turkeys. Father would buy a carload of turkeys and have them sent in from the Middle West. Then he would fatten them, and his biggest customer was the beer producer, I forget the name, they're in Wilmington. And one year he had ordered a great many dozens of turkeys and every one of them must be 25 pounds or over. Well, the turkeys were doing beautifully. There were just hundreds of them out there, talking away, eating all they could possibly eat, getting fatter every day. And then one morning we awakened and there wasn't a fat turkey in sight, only the scrawny ones. In the night, thieves had come, and the large turkeys never flew very far up into the trees. They always roosted on the lower branches. And by taking a board and pressing on the turkey's feet, he would walk right down to the man who wanted to take him with him. So there wasn't a turkey that weighed anything like 25 pounds because all of the other turkeys had flown up into the tree. I don't recall what he did for turkeys. I'm sure he thought of something, though, to keep faith with the man who wanted to give his employees each a turkey for Christmas.

Q You said that the winters were colder then, you always had snow banks around the house. Could you tell us something about the winter and the way you lived then?

A As I have said, our nearest neighbors were a mile. The nearest school was three miles. If Mother would board the teacher, I was allowed to go to the school that was only a mile. In the wintertime, the big boys came, and those big boys were Frank, Howard, Clarence, and Stuart Pool. And Stuart Pool, the one who was the well-known doctor afterwards in Pittsburgh, sat back of me and pulled my curls, and I didn't love him for it. They were all musical and their sister played the piano. They each played an instrument. They were the most fun ever. But they were big boys and I had to grow up before I really appreciated them. They were our nearest neighbors—a mile. And during the winters, when the roads were filled with snow, the snow would be from one side of the hedge on one side of the road, to the hedge on the other. It would be simply full of snow. Nobody put up snow fences in those days. And so the roads from the beginning of winter until the end went across the fields where the snow had left open places in its dripping. The road that was used came right past our front porch, so Mother, having so much cream that she didn't know what to do with, always had a big freezer of ice cream and all the people who passed that way would stop and took a quart of ice cream home. As soon as the freezer was empty, then, having plenty of colored men to turn the crank, another freezerful was made. And dozens, hundreds of jars of peaches were canned so that it could be peach ice cream. And to this day, don't mention peach ice cream to me. But all the country round loved Mother's peach ice cream, just like they loved her
ladycake. She made ladycake—the whites of fourteen eggs—for the ladies. She made pound cake and sponge cake for the men. She was a marvelous cook. The women used to come and spend the day and sew carpet rags or quilt quilts. The horses were taken out and put in the stable and fed; the women had one of Mother's good dinners—we didn't know the meaning of the word lunch in those days; it was a dinner at 12:00 and about somewhere between five and six there was a cooked supper. When they'd be leaving, they would say, "Dolly, we've had such a nice day." And Mother would say, "We couldn't have had it if you hadn't come." She was a gracious hostess.

Father entertained a great deal. He was always bringing the lawyers home—the younger ones from Wilmington—and getting acquainted with them. He served in the legislature in... [There is a long interruption in the tape here where no sound is audible. The interview picks up below.]

Q Did many people make homemade wine then?

A Oh, yes, almost everybody made homemade wine. And the women who were white ribboners made it out of blackberries and called it cordial, and it was used for the summer disease.

Q What about the parties when you were a young girl—dances and people who used to come to your house?

A That's such a long story. I think we'll have to have a chapter called "Social Life." To begin with, I was sent away to school at an early age, and most of my friends were made away from home—that is, girl friends. When I graduated from Friends Central and came home, I was 19, and I didn't want to spend the time playing whist, it was then, and just going to dances and parties. So I joined the Woman's Club in Middletown, which was fairly new. And they had no young people. In fact, I was the only young person in the whole state of Delaware who belonged to the Woman's Club. I was called the only junior. Later, when young women were included in the Federation of Women, and that happened in Ridley Park that the Junior Federation was formed, the Junior Woman's Club was formed, that was the beginning of young women belonging to the Woman's Club. Of course now there are thousands and thousands of these juniors, but they still maintain their own program. They have their own vice president, who sits on the national board, and they do marvelous things in helping many who can't help themselves. I remember just one little thing. I remember one year I was very much concerned about those—this was a long time ago—about those men out at the Valley Forge Hospital having nothing to do, no way to take up the slack and all the idle time that they had. And I got together some stamps—both of our boys were at that time stamp collectors. And I got these stamps together and sent out to them and we started what is now done nationally, the juniors of the Women's Club send stamps all over the country to the hospitals where there are veterans who will always be hospitalized. And they say that the men will be lying listlessly on their cot, when somebody yells, "The mail's in and there's stamps." And they all come alive and dive under their beds, get out their stamp catalog or their stamp album, and such a happy time as they have trading and exchanging...
stamps and going through those that have just come in. If you have any stamps, just think of those men.

Q When you were the first youngest member of the Middletown club, about how large was it? And what did you do when you were a member?

A I love that question, what did I do. I always made the fire. I had to go five miles by carriage over roads that were mostly ruts and mud or snow, and you couldn't trot your horse, so you walked the horse for five miles, and you got pretty cold. But I always took a peach basket full of kindling and cobs with some [inaudible] oil on 'em so I could make the fire burn quickly. And our place of meeting was a little room--well, it was very long but very narrow--over Mr. Connolly's store on Main Street in Middletown. And you had to go up these crooked little narrow steps and because I was the young one, it seemed that I was there to wait on the older women. And I was given many kinds of jobs. And I remember Middletown felt at last that it was large enough to entertain the state federation and women came from all the different clubs all up and down the state--they sent delegates. And they were housed in the homes. I remember I had seven that I took out home. And Father had had a big wagon made in the barn for us girls and boys to go places in. It had two horses, but it was just filled with seats, and you could put in a dozen or more people in this wagon. Because once a year we had the what was called the Delaware Crowd--brother James and I were the only Delawareans, but--and Willa Lisason--but it was called the Delaware Crowd, although the rest came from Pennsylvania. And this wagon was for us girls to go on picnics and various things. Well, we had this wagon filled with people, taking them out to the farm to keep them for the two nights that they were guests of the Middle Woman's Club. And Mrs. Vandergriff--her husband was a well known lawyer in Wilmington, a cousin of my mother's, Mrs. Louis Vandergriff, was president of the state at that time. And each one of the clubs represented had a report to make. When it came Middletown's turn, I was pushed onto the stage by Molly Pool and told to make the report for the Middletown club. And she sang, "We'll do anything, we'll do anything you want us to do, but we can't talk. You'll have to get on there and make the report." So they hadn't done anything to report, because they'd spent all the year getting ready to entertain the women from the rest of the state. So I remember quoting from Albert Hubbard that there must be a fallow time for the field in order that there may be a harvest and a yield. And that was my report. But the president, Mrs. Vandergriff, seemed to think that was very wonderful, and so I got her applause. But was I scared.

Father brought not only the young lawyers but many of the older men would come home with him. Coming home with Father was rather an ordeal because you had to come by train to either Mt. Pleasant or Middletown and then drive five or three miles. When he was Recorder of Deeds, he went from Mt. Pleasant every morning and that last half mile, whoever was taking him to the train, knew that the horse must run to catch the train, and sure enough, when you'd get to the station, there was the train waiting for him, because he was always late. One morning we had a balky horse. Before he even got to the train, he'd given the horse away. And the older men came as well. George Gray was an older lawyer and also in political life. Thomas F. Bayard [__]--how well I remember him. He was such a fine looking,
upstanding man. He was the Ambassador to England and we were all so proud of his record. But my Grandfather Vandegrift who was very hard to understand why grownup men would drink and become intoxicated and not know what they were doing or saying, he learned one day that Thomas F. Bayard would take a drink, and he said to my father, "James, you don't mean it. You don't mean it, that Thomas F. Bayard would drink whiskey." Why all the men of those days drank whiskey. It seemed to be—most of them didn't get drunk. They had like they have cocktails now, one or two drinks and that was it. I remember when I had an audience with the Queen of Holland, the daughter of Queen Wilhelmina—Wilhelmina at the time was in the garden painting. She wouldn't come in. She wouldn't come in at all, because she said, "I take nothing from my daughter. She is now Queen." And we were being entertained at the summer home. And each one of us had a little time allotted to have a personal conversation with the Queen. So when my turn came, I said, not knowing what to say to a queen—I had never talked to a queen, never expected to, and not knowing what to say, I said, "I had an ancestor baptized here in the Presbyterian Church in the 1600's." She said, "My dear, that was a long time ago." And I thought, "Why did I bring that up?"

Q I don't think the Queen made a very good kind of hostess rejoinder for you.

A Oh, she was a marvelous hostess. And she was dressed so simply that morning in a little blue flannel dress, and her only ornament was a ceramic horse that her older daughter had made at school. What was it you wanted to know?

Q I wanted to ask you how you happened to do your extensive travel and who you represented when you went abroad.

A Oh yes. I was travelling with a group of—called "A Good Will Tour to Europe." We were entertained in every embassy, briefed on what the United States was doing in that country and many times they answered our questions of why those people didn't like us. And you would know if you thought about it, because we very often are the ugly American. When we left New York, the Department of State from Washington had sent a representative to brief us, and we were told that we were ambassadors of good will without portfolio. And that was our job, was to try and sell the United States. Well, the president of the General Federation, which is the largest group of women in the world and has numbers next to the United States Government, she of course talked with the higher-ups. But I always picked some of the lower-downs because we had more in common perhaps. Like the mechanics in an airport when we were waiting for a plane. We would get into the greatest discussions. And they would ask questions and questions about the United States and those people I picked because they were not likely to be as informed as some of the higher-ups. So one day Mrs. Houghton, the president of General Federation, came over to where a group of us, the mechanics and myself, were talking, and just about that time something funny had been said and they had exploded in laughter and she said, "Let me in on this. You have a much better time than I do." So then they began to pelt her with questions. And she said, "Why haven't I been in on this all this time? You've been having the fun all to yourself." But I felt that I was doing just what they told me to do, being an ambassador of good will without
portfolio. Sometime I'll tell you of the experience in the Argentine when Peron was in the saddle and Evita was living. But not today.

Q Mrs. Ferguson, could you tell us something about the McDonough [sp] School, what it was like when you first went there?

A I had no right to go to McDonough School because I was not in that district. I was supposed to go to Jamison Corner which is near Mt. Pleasant. But being such a little thing and never having been in school, Mother didn't like the idea of me having to go three miles to school when there was a school only a mile distant. So she took the teacher to board, which was what they wanted her to do, if they allowed me to go to school. And I went there for one or two years, and then transferred to the Jamison Corner School. By that time my brother James, who's three years younger than I, was old enough to go to school, so the man took the two of us every morning with the horse and carriage to school. It was too far for us to walk; three miles over a country road was a little bit far for children under eight years old. But the McDonough School was--always had more children than the Jamison Corner. The Jamison Corner children came from such a long distance, and when the roads were filled with snow, they just couldn't get out of their homes to come to school. And many days Bill, the man who took us to school, would manage to get us there after the sleigh had upset two or three times and he'd gotten out and sat on the horses head until he got it unharnessed and got it up and harnessed again and we'd arrive at school late to find nobody there at all. The teacher hadn't been able to get through the snowdrift. So it was a lost day and we'd turn around and go home and try it again next day. Usually there would be school two or three days out of the week. But it was not certain at all. And all the big boys came in the wintertime, and their big boots and the snow that they brought in. And the room was so cold—it was heated by a , they call them I think pot-bellied stoves, where they put in chunks of wood, and it kept one person pretty busy stoking the fire. And unless you sat right on top of the stove, you were really very cold. To this day I have frosted feet from the experience of being frosted in that country school. Almost every child did have frosted feet and frosted fingers. And when it was very cold the teacher would allow us to take the benches and put them around the stove, and we'd sit right on top of it. When our faces were very warm, baked, then we'd turn around and bake the backs. So half the children would be sitting with their backs to the stove and half with their faces to the stove. And if you wanted a drink of water, why you had to find something that you could chop the ice out of the water bucket so as to get a drink of water, because the bucket was frozen almost solid. And you had to walk a mile to get a bucket of water, too. But we all considered that a great—oh, really, the teacher had done you an honor to say, "You may go for a bucket of water," because there were two of us who would go for the water. Usually, though, it was boys. I don't remember going for water because the boys were always given the preference. But it was quite a honor to be able to pass the water. Everybody drank out of the same tin cup, and we'd go get a tin cup full of water, pass it down one bench; everybody'd take what they wanted to drink, and there was one boy who could drink three cups of that water and we always waited for him for last—he never got the water first, because we thought he was kind of pig­gish. And the older boys coming in had lost so much time that they looked
very odd with these little children. The boys would be in the same grade with children eight and nine years old and they were all ready to shave. And I remember we had to toe the line in spelling lessons. And I had been at the head of the line for a long time because this man who took us to school was an Irishman who had lived with Father before he was married—before Father was married. And he was a man who had come over from Ireland and had had some college education and was really quite a bright man. But he wasn't very kind to himself, because he drank to excess. And Mother was never able, although she tried very hard—we were all very fond of Bill and she tried very hard to do something about it, but... He married and had a family but he never got over being fond of whiskey. But he saw to it that we knew our lessons, especially spelling. And when we'd be going to school in the morning, he'd hear the lessons from the time we left home until we got to school. And if we missed a word in spelling, well it was just too bad because he had no patience with us not knowing our lessons. And so for that reason, with Bill's help, I usually stood at the head of the class. And we must toe a line in those floor boards, or the person below you could what we said, cut you down. He could walk up above you and you would no longer be at the head of the class. Well, this morning, there were all these big boys, big men, standing in the class and I, a ten-year-old, standing at the head of the class and had been there for some time because of Bill, and I got my foot over the line and a big boy, who had been at the tail end of the class as long as I'd been at the head of the class, came up and beyond me—he cut me down and he was the head of the class and I was second. Well, it was just more than ten years could take, so I burst out crying and the teacher said, "Oh, that doesn't make any difference. Tomorrow morning you'll cut him down." So sure enough, before the day was over he'd missed a word that I could spell and I was head of the class again and had sort of restored my self respect. But dear me, when I told Bill, that was just too bad; if I could learn to spell the words, couldn't I learn to watch out where that line was that I had to toe. And I never managed to miss the line after that on Bill's account.

One of the great entertainments when you went out of an evening, because they didn't play bridge in those days—I finally got our country people to playing whist and then we played duplicate and met once every two weeks, all the farmers around who played cards. I think we had 20 belonging to the group. And we'd have supper. When they came to our house, Mother always had a supper. But when we went to other houses, we had refreshments. But most of the entertainment was a spelling bee. We never had spelling bees because we had other things. In fact we were expected to have other things. We were expected to do something different, and sometimes you wondered what the difference was gonna be, because you couldn't always come up with something different. But we had the spelling bee. And if we came home from a spelling bee, brother James and myself, not first and second—we couldn't both be first, but one had to be first and one had to be second or Bill just didn't speak to us. It was just too bad if we didn't know how to spell.

My father was made Recorder of Deeds, and I wrote a fairly good hand and he thought that I could be used in his office copying deeds and legal papers. My Grandfather Shallcross said, "No, indeed. Mary is going to
be educated and she is not going to do anything else but go to school."
So I had done all and gone as far as I could go at Jamison Corner and I
was 13 years old when they sent me to Friends Central in Philadelphia.
You couldn't imagine anything that was more--well, I don't know how to
put it--sending a green 13-year-old to a city school was almost disastrous.
To begin with, my clothes were not right. Mother had a dressmaker from
Odessa, Delaware who came two and three times a year and stayed two weeks
to sew us up for the season. She was allowed to use her full imagination
on the clothes that I was to take away to boarding school. And whenever
Miss Lizzie found a place that she could put another velvet bow or another
button, she put it there until I looked like a trimmed Christmas tree.
I don't wonder as I look back that the girls thought I was very funny.
Then of course my southern accent, the way I said c-o-w, that I could hear
it all over the school being said behind my back. And one day in class
we had a Professor Ivans who--over eighty--who was supposed to be the top
mathematician in Philadelphia. He was prized very highly by the committee
for Friends Central. And he called me before the board and told me to
write 326,000 and in writing it I used a comma after each third number.
In other words, 326, I put a comma and then three oughts. He said, "Why
write 326 million." Well, I did the same thing. I put every three num-
bers, I put a comma. He simply exploded. Where had I come from that I
was so stupid as to use commas. Didn't I know that they never used commas
in writing down numbers and so on and so forth. And when he cooled down
a little bit, he said, "Where did thee come from," because after all they
were all supposed to use plain language. And I said, very meekly and
quietly, "From Delaware." "Oh," he said, "that flat country." I said,
"Why, we have Iron Hill." He kept on talking about my stupidity until
one of the girls said, "Professor Ivans, thy wig is on crooked." That
of course changed the color of things, and he said, "Well, thee come and
put it straight." So Mary Post really helped me out that time, and I
loved her ever since. And we got to be the greatest of friends, but she
went up and instead of just straightening it, she took it off, and then
there was a howl of laughter went up. So I think she was a little bit
disconcerted, just as I had been. As I have said, I was 13 and the color
of green grass. When I would go to school in the morning, I had to keep
my eye on the wooden Indian so as to know what street I was on. I had to
see that Presbyterian Church steeple to be sure I was turning the right
way. I hadn't learned to use the numbers or the names of the streets; I
was using objects, just like an Indian. And I was boarding at a Friends
Boarding House and was the only child in the Friends Boarding House. They
were all older people. In fact, some of them were quite old. But they
seemed to like having a child and I really didn't want for friends because
they were all wonderful to me. But we had--I don't know how to describe
Sidney. She was the matron or the head of the whole house and she was
very very saving, very careful of discipline. They had a parlor that was
for all to use, but you must be very careful and keep the lights turned
down or else off--because there was a light that would illuminate the room
from the hall. And she was very much like the woman that my brother Gene
used to tell about when he went to his first boarding house from Delaware
College--he was a graduate of Delaware College and went to Saulvey [sp] in
New York and had a job there as a mechanical engineer. Afterwards they
gave him a laboratory and made him a chemical engineer without him knowing
it. And he said in his boarding house the woman who ran the house would
say to the woman who waited on the table, "Mary, pass the butter." She would take the plate of butter herself and sort of flip it around the table and say, "Butter, butter, butter. Anybody want butter? Nobody wants butter, Mary, take it off the table." And it was very like that with Sidney. If you want some sugar, take it quickly and don't be taking a second spoonful. Take it off the table. She stayed too long. Many things were like that. And when Father would send us several baskets of peaches or a crate of strawberries or something of the kind, we didn't get to have them on the table because Sidney always canned or preserved them, for wintertime, she said. And Father'd send an extra basket next time thinking we could have them right then, but never did we get the fresh ones. They were always canned for wintertime. But Sidney had her good points. The boys from Wilmington that boarded there started a game, it was really bridge, but we played it with Authors, the cards that you play Authors with. And there are twelve just the same as in the regular pack of cards, and four cards, and they were called—they called it ABC. The game was ABC, but we played it just like bridge, or whist as it was known then. Bridge hadn't been thought of. And Sidney spent an awful lot of time watching that game because she had a feeling that it had something to do with playing cards. Now she couldn't find any fault with Authors but anything that smacked of playing cards had to go out. And were we playing euchre? No, we were playing ABC. Were we playing whist? No, we were playing ABC. "Well, what is ABC?" "Well, if thee'll sit down Sidney, we'll teach thee how to play ABC." Poor dear, she never found out what ABC was and it was rather distressing to see her anxiety for fear she was allowing something in the Friends Boarding House that really shouldn't be there. The boys from Wilmington had an uncle who was a playboy and he really was our salvation. He took us to dinner at the Art Club and the Union League and various places and theater. And oh, speaking of theater, we girls at school—and I was fortunate, you know, even though I was country and so very green, it wasn't long before the girls really—I guess they took pity on me, but anyway, they took me on as part of a group, and I really had a very happy time. And one thing that we did was go to the theater once a week, and we always sat in a box. And the reason of that was we had one girl who was clever enough to tip the usher, and he would say, "Wait until most of the crowd is in and we'll see which box is empty." And in advance we knew to wear our best clothes so that we'd be creditable and make a good show. And then we would go in the box for admission ticket only. We'd buy an admission ticket, all get together—I think there were eight of us—and we gave 25¢, made $2.00 for the usher. And $2.00 was $2.00 in those days, so we always sat in the box. And we saw Irving and Terry, all the Barrymore family, Joe Jefferson, Majesca, whose son afterwards masterminded the bridge across the Schuykill, and who played Portia—oh, that was Terry. And oh yes, we heard Human Hinke—sp—and oh, I loved Human Hinke so that even after I had graduated and came home, and went back every year to make a long visit in Philadelphia during the winter, I always went to hear Human Hinke. And when I would be home winter evenings, I usually gave a performance for the benefit of the family of Human Hinke. I couldn't sing, but I could act like Human Hinke. And the family would go in stitches. "Poor Human Hinke, she lost her voice, but she had to keep on because of the money trouble in the family." One of the nicest people at the boarding house was Asenith—sp—you don't often come across that name—Moore. Most of them called her Grandma. She was in her late 80's and a beautiful little old woman, and just darling to visit. I remember so many of the little bits of verses that she taught me. One couplet was: "'Tis sweet to be remembered and sad to be forgotten."
I've tried all through life to remember Asenith Moore, because when I have come across old people, I've thought of Asenith--we all called her Asenith, those who didn't call her Grandmother, and remember that she said it was sad to be forgotten and sweet to be remembered. Because it is. It's a fact, and I think we all, especially those of us who are older, realize that. 'Tis sweet to be remembered.

[END OF INTERVIEW]