B. ETHELDA MULLEN

RETIRED EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

FAMILY SOCIETY OF WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

Interviewed by:
John H. Gauger
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Transcribed by:
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B. ETHELDA MULLEN

Educated at Misses Hebs School (Wilmington)
Illman Training School for Kindergarteners (of University of Pennsylvania)

Started kindergarten in Wilmington

1917 Volunteer service with Associated Charities

1918 General secretary in November. In six months, became Executive Secretary

1951 Retired from Family Society (formerly Associated Charities) after 34 years of service

May, - Nov., Executive director of the Temporary Relief Commission for New Castle County

1920 Attended New York School of Social Work with 19 others from across the country. Studied under Mary E. Redmond, a social work pioneer

1946 Received the Certificate of Merit and the Selective Service Medal in the name of Congress, the only woman so honored in Delaware

Charter member of the Wilmington Quota Club, a professional women's group

1951 Named to Delaware Rent Advisory Board

1953-1957 Chairman of Welfare Council's Commission on the Aging

Member of the Board of the Wilmington's Girls' Club

Worked with Junior League

1959 Family Service dedicated its new headquarters building to Miss Mullen

June, Received Honorary Master of Arts Degree from the University of Delaware
This interview is with Miss B. Ethelda Mullen, retired executive secretary of the Family Society of Wilmington, Delaware.

Interviewer: Miss Mullen, are you originally from Delaware?
Miss Mullen: Yes sir, born in Wilmington.

Interviewer: Did you have all your schooling in Wilmington also?
Miss Mullen: No. I went to a private school, a girls' private school in Wilmington. Then I went to the Illman Training School in Philadelphia, which is part of the University of Pennsylvania. Then I went to New York-after I got into social work-I went to New York and took some special courses there. I was one of twenty people chosen throughout the country to take this course in Philadelphia, New York, I beg your pardon, under the auspices of the--what is now the Family Welfare Association of America. Then I went back to the University and took courses in administration of social work while I was working. That's the background of education.

Interviewer: How did you first become interested in social work?
Miss Mullen: That was an accident. I was trained for kindergartener work. I put in three years training in Philadelphia at kindergartener work, had my own kindergartener for about three
years, then they asked me to come back and take a course in normal training of kindergarteners at the same school. And I did that for two years. And then I was taken ill, and I was ill almost the whole of the year. And when I was getting around, a friend of mine said: "Oh, you need something to do. Come down and do some volunteer work." At the old Associated Charities, which later became Family Welfare. That I did. I never went back to kindergarten. That's how I got into it. It was all accidental. But that, of course, meant the training in New York and back at the University of Pennsylvania for training there, because I didn't have that kind of background.

**Interviewer:** But now over the years that you have been associated with the welfare, the Family Welfare Society, what type of things has this been involved in, what type of activities?

**Miss Mullens:** Well, I have been involved in almost everything in the nature of social work in the state. You must remember that I was a pioneer, that there wasn't social work as we know it now when I started out. I was the executive of the old Associated Charities, into which job I fell because of this volunteer work, and later a job, and then on up to executive. We had to start every new agency that we needed; for instance, the Children's Bureau when we realized the work that needed to be done among children. I was instrumental in that. What is now the Family Court which was started as the juvenile court. The various things that came up out of dealing with families, and realizing their needs as special needs which would have to be dealt with specifically, we had to make an
agency to take care of it. I was on the board of Christiana Community Center, the Crittendon Home, the Children's Bureau, the Girls' Club. There were any number of agencies that I was on the board until those boards got going and started, and then I stepped out because it was my conviction that the executive of one agency should not be on the administrative board of another agency.

During World War II I headed up the work with the draft board in selective service on the social and medical plane, and we interviewed—-I set up a core of people—-and we interviewed all of the men who were going into service. That was a very interesting job for which I got the Congressional Medal, which I'm very proud of.

In '34 the state was in difficulty with its relief programs, being the days of the Depression; and Governor Buck came to my board and asked if they would lend me to set up a relief commission for New Castle County, which they did, and I got that moving. We had a big organization, I had about a hundred people working for me. I never gave up my job with Family Society because this was my job, and I knew I was going back to it eventually so that they paid me a token salary, and I worked most of the time for the Temporary Emergency Relief Commission of which Mr. P. S. duPont, Sr., was the president of the commission.

Interviewer: What type of things did the commission do?

Miss Mullens: Well, that was a job dealing with the unemployed; and we were ripe with unemployed at that time. We handled hundreds and hundreds of cases. It was a big job. We had the
old telephone building at Sixth and Shipley Streets and used it all, and we administered relief, also tried to help people back on their feet, tried to take care of the problems that ensued from their unemployment and their lack of funds, their family difficulties that came up, which always come up at times like that. It was a pretty big job. I liked it, but it wasn't my bowl of potatoes because what I really wanted was intensive work with a smaller group of families where I could really do some rehabilitation and try to get people where they could use their own strength to get on their own feet. So eventually I went back to Family Service. I stayed down there two years and got this organized for them, and then I went back.

**Interviewer:** That's what the Family Service did then, it took smaller groups of people?

**Miss Mullens:** We could give more time. Yes, our caseload wouldn't run over perhaps 700 to 800 families a year; and with 13 or 14 workers you could give them much more time than you could give to hundreds and hundreds of people on a public relief job. I did, I think, a fairly good job on public relief, but it wasn't what I wanted, and they knew it when I took it. That was that job.

**Interviewer:** Well, that job didn't last too much longer, did it?

**Miss Mullens:** Yes, it lasted a couple more years. A girl who was working with me as one of my supervisors took it over and finished it up. That's my only experience in public agency work.

**Interviewer:** Well, was Pierre duPont often found in charitable work?
Miss Mullen: Pierre duPont was found in every kind of charitable work in the State of Delaware. Anything at all that people needed he wanted to do. The whole duPont family are responsible for very much of what has been done in Wilmington to help people. All of them. I worked with all of them. And we wouldn't, Delaware would not be where it is in education, social work, public works if it were not for the duPont family. There is no question about that.

Now, some of the other things that I have done. I have served on the State Merit System ever since it was organized. That's a commission of three people. I have been on it ever since it was organized. The other people have changed.

Interviewer: I'm not sure what that does.

Miss Mullen: All agencies receiving federal funds must employ through a merit system.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Miss Mullen: We advertise for vacancies, we interview applicants; the board does not do that but the staff does it--we have a staff. The board meets periodically to go over what's being done, to receive a report from the executive, to formulate policy, to make decisions. That's been an interesting job.

I organized the first chapter of the American Association of Social Workers in Delaware. I organized the first chapter of the National Association of Social Work in Delaware. These are off-my-job things. This was not because I was better able to do these things, but because I was the only person at the time who knew enough about it and cared enough about it to get it moving. This was early in the game, you see, when there were
not many social workers, when there were no schools of social work, when you had to find your way. So it just naturally fell into my lap, not because I was the best person but because I was there.

Interviewer: About what year would that have been?
Miss Mullen: Oh, that was way back about 1918 or '19 that these things happened.

It's been interesting, and I've been glad to have a finger in the various pies, and it's something to think about now that I have retired. I don't think there is any social work in the State of Delaware that I haven't been fairly active in, any organization. I have been working with all of them through the years.

We set up a defense organization here during the Second World War where mobilization was affected in event of a disaster, and I headed that up. I mustered all the people in every form of social work, and we did practice drills and things of that sort. I got that organized for them. But I don't take any credit for this. I can't, because I was the only person here who could do it, you see. It wasn't a question of choosing me or somebody else--here I was, and it just kind of fell in my lap. When you've worked as long as I did, well, things come to you; you don't have to look for them. (chuckle)

Interviewer: People get to know you.
Miss Mullen: Yes.

You, of course, know that the University gave me an honorary degree in 1960--you probably know--of which I am very proud. My own university, my own state would even want to do that.
These are some of the things that I have done.

I've worked with the Junior League of Wilmington for probably, oh, 30 years. I organized its provisional course every year, which is the course that young girls must take before they are admitted to the Junior League. We set up a course in community interest, and I've done that every year and gotten their speakers and carried that through every year. That's been one of the most interesting things that I've done.

I'm a member of the Quota Club of Wilmington, which is the oldest women's service club, similar to Rotary, taking one woman who is executive or owner of each business or profession. I've been president of that. I've been on the International Board of Quota.

I've played around with a lot of things when you stop to think about it. They happen one at a time, and you forget; but when you really stop to think about it, there have been a lot of things.

Interviewer: Amazing.

Miss Mullen: And I wonder now how I ever found time to do it, but I did. But it's all because I was there and available.

Interviewer: Was that the only social working institution in Wilmington at the time?

Miss Mullen: Associated Charities?

Interviewer: Yes.

Miss Mullen: Yes, it was the first and only then. Out of that has grown these other organizations, most of them have grown out of it. Yes, it was the only thing. And it was primarily just a relief-giving agency. It didn't know anything about
social work, as we see social work today. People were hungry, they were cold, they were out of a place to live, and you took care of it. It was a voluntary agency, privately supported always. Never had any federal money; never had any public money at all.

Interviewer: And it doesn't today either?
Miss Mullen: And it doesn't today. It's developed into a Family counseling service now that we have a public relief department. It's called Family Service, and it's a counseling service now. Oh, there's a tiny budget for relief where you can't work with a family in trouble. Maybe if they can't pay their rent or are going to be evicted, you may pay one month's rent or something like that, but you don't take it on for a long time.

Interviewer: Who were some of the other interested leaders that you think of beside the duPonts?
Miss Mullen: Mr. James T. Skelly is one of the early— He's been dead for a number of years. The Skelly family is still around Wilmington. The Warners. Mrs. A. D. Warner, Sr., was a moving force in this community. She's been dead for years. Her children are all dead. She has grandchildren living in Wilmington. The Warner family is very prominent in Wilmington. The Rhoades family has done a lot for Wilmington. Mr. Phil Rhoades is still president, chairman, of the Merit System Board now.

Interviewer: He's with the Morrocco Leather Company?
Miss Mullen: He isn't with them anymore. He was. He's part of that family. Let's see, who else. Mr. J. Thompson
Brown and his family. He was one of the early vice-presidents of the DuPont Company. Mr. Charles L. Patterson was president of the Associated Charities when I first went there to work. I don't think any of his family are left around Wilmington, but he was a very prominent man at the time. He was also one of the vice-presidents of the DuPont Company. A lot of the leadership has come out of the DuPont family and the DuPont Company. As I look back on the presidents that we have had in the agency, practically all of them have been DuPont people. Mr. Brown, Mr. Skelly, Mr. Cole Coolidge, Mr. P. S. duPont III, and there are others who were presidents of the Family Society through the years, all of them coming out of the DuPont Company. It is surprising how much they really gave to the community, not only in money but of themselves. Mr. Lamotte duPont said to me one day: "I don't want to give my money where I can't give myself." And this is the way they felt about it. So, they have contributed very, very much to the development of what's happened in Delaware.

Interviewer: What would you say some of the needed social reforms are today in Delaware?

Miss Mullen: We need more work in housing. We need more services for the youth of the community. We need more recreational opportunities, not only for youth but for young married couples.

My feeling is that we need the churches to step out into the community and give the leadership to this kind of thing. I'm a member of Grace Church at Ninth and West Streets.
My father and mother and grandmother all were members there. I feel that my church needs to step out and step widely into the community. It's a downtown church. It is right where it could really make itself felt. They need it. 

**Interviewer:** This is something that the churches really haven't done in the past, have they?

**Miss Mullens:** Not much. They are beginning to do it. St. Andrew's is doing a magnificent job, Eighth and Shipley Streets, Episcopal church Eighth and Shipley Streets, is doing a magnificent job. Grace Church is doing a little, but not enough. Not nearly enough. Because we have the money, and we have the people, and we have the ability, and we could do more.

One of the other things we did was open and operate a camp for children at Hockessin, outside of Hockessin, which is now being operated by the West End Neighborhood House. We still own the property. But we started it, it was a free camp for children who couldn't go anywhere. That ran for many years, and we did a pretty good job. We took 50 children at a time. It was quite a nice property, nice swimming pool, nice building. We just bought the piece of land and worked it up. Here was another need, you see, that we saw. Everything came because in what we were doing we saw a new need which had to be met, so we would go out and do it. This is what has made it interesting. There was never a place where you got on a flat place and didn't have some place to move. You had to go to something else. When you got one thing done, you had to do another.
Interviewer: You had a struggle to start some of these. Wasn't there opposition sometimes?

Miss Mullene: Oh yes, yes. It had to be worked out. It didn't all happen just as smoothly as I'm saying it happened. But it happens if you care enough about it. It's been, as I say, a very rewarding life for me. I started there in 1917, and I retired in '51, and I thought they were pretty rich years. I wouldn't give it up for anything in the world.

But social work has changed. As I say, when I went there, it was a matter of keeping people from starving to death or freezing to death, but now it's a matter of helping people to a way of life which can be satisfying to them and productive. We didn't know that when we started out, but we learned it from the people themselves. Nobody set up social work as a science. We learned from people's needs that we had to go further than paying the rent or buying a ton of coal. We learned that there were other needs that people had and that there were reasons behind the fact that they didn't have the coal and the rent. So social work developed. And then we began to think of it as a science, and we began to set up schools for social work all over the country in the various universities. And it became a profession. But it started out as just a way of helping people in a very simple, direct way. Now it's much more difficult, it takes much more skill, it takes much more background, education, training and experience.

The Family Services, incidentally, is accepted by Bryn Mawr, Smith, University of Pennsylvania, one of the southern
colleges as a training ground for their students. They put students in your agency, and your supervisor in the agency works with the advisor at the university. And you have the student for maybe two years, or you may have this one for one and another one for one, but you have as many students as the agency can find work for who are also going to school. And they have to put them in accredited agencies. And I'm very proud to say that the agency from its very beginning has had what they call an A rating, as Family Service agencies go. We have a very fine executive now, and a very fine staff.

**Interviewer:** Who is executive now?

**Miss Mullen:** Mrs. Ann Bender. She worked for me for four years, and I groomed her for the job. You know when you held a job as long as I did and worked as hard and put as much of yourself into it you want to be a little bit sure about who's going to take it over. That's selfish, isn't it?

**Interviewer:** But I can see it (chuckle). It makes sense.

**Miss Mullen:** I was watching people in the agency during the last years that I was working, preparatory to retirement, til I found the one I wanted to groom in there. And I said to the Board: "This is it." And they said: "O.K." That was it. She's done a marvellous job.

**Interviewer:** One thing that occurred to me. Did you ever run into families that you, the agency, would have liked to help, but they didn't want any help?

**Miss Mullen:** Once in a while. There's a partial answer to that. People who say they don't want to be helped are fighting
their own feeling of defeat, and they don't want to admit it. And if you can do the kind of thing that I believe we can do now, help them to realize that they are not the only people in the world that have, maybe so called, failed, and that we can help--they are the most satisfying jobs that you can get. I mean, because here are people who really have some feeling of wanting to be different than they are. You can usually help--not always, but usually you can. It is very interesting.

This is not at all important, but as I told you in the beginning, we were a relief-giving agency per se. Well, all right. One of the very prominent women in Wilmington who came of an old family called me on the telephone one day and said she was having a problem with two adolescent children who were living with her. It was at the time of the war and the bombing in England, and she had brought these children over here. She didn't know what to do with adolescent children. She was two generations removed from them. And she said: "I wish there was an agency like your agency that could handle problems for people who could pay for it." And we went to work on that. And we have a fee system and have had for years. Now maybe they can pay $.50 an interview, maybe they can pay $10 an interview. We have chemists from the DuPont Company, we have very important people coming into the agency who pay a $10 interview fee, I mean a visit, and come once a week. We have other people who may pay $.50 an interview. We have many more who pay nothing. It's the same service, the same amount of time, the same amount of skill, but it enables a
person who wants it and doesn't want to take it for nothing
to get it. That's been one of the significant things that
came out of one woman's request.

**Interviewer:** Even if they pay just a very small amount---

**Miss Mullen:** They don't know whether they are paying the
full amount or not. It's based on their income, the size of
their family, the number of people who have to live on that
income, what their obligations are. But they feel better if
they can pay that $.50.

You have a man and a woman who were having some marital
difficulties, and it's gotten to the point where they don't
know what to do with it, and they don't want to go to court,
and they want some way to get some help. They will come to
the agency. Now, they may be people who are well able to pay,
you see. Or they may not. One have marital difficulties if
one has a tiny income, and one has them if they have a large
income. It is not dependent on the amount of money they have
all the time. But that's a sliding scale. It runs from
nothing up to the full price for a visit. Some of those
people come once a week for interviews and pay the full cost.

We also have in the agency a homemaker service which is
very valuable. That may someday be separated just as the
visiting nurse was. We started the Visiting Nurse Association,
and then when it was big enough to stand on its own feet, it
became an independent organization. That was back in '32, I
think. Oh no, it was before that. It must have been '22.
But it was just a committee of the old Associated Charities.
Now it's one of the biggest organizations in town. When it got big enough, we split it off and gave it money enough to run one year and away they went. It's done a fine job.

I think it is important that an agency that probably was the key agency because it was the only agency in the beginning can see when the time comes to let a thing go. The last thing that we let go was the camp, the children's camp. We were not doing that kind of service; we no longer needed free camps. So West End Neighborhood needed camps, so we let them have the property to run. We own it yet.

When the visiting nurses was big enough and old enough and strong enough to stand on its own, we let it go. This is the kind of thing that I think is important—not to hold on to something when it can be an entity of its own.

**Interviewer:** You started to mention the Homemakers.

**Miss Mullens:** Oh, the Homemakers' service. Well, that's pretty important. This is a service, we have a staff of mature women, I don't know who many there are there now, but a staff of mature women who have raised their own children, had homes of their own. Their children are out from under, and they want something to do, and they are capable people. And you take them in and train them and put them under a supervisor. We will say, the Jones case is being handled by Miss Smith. Then Miss Smith works with the homemaker around the need for the family. Maybe the mother is going to the hospital to have a baby. The homemaker goes in. She stays from the time the father goes to work in the morning until he comes back at night, does every-
thing for the children that a mother would do. Maybe it's a period of a longer illness. She may stay for two to three months on that day-to-day basis. Always there must be a responsible adult in the home who would be the father if the mother was out. This has been a wonderful service, because a woman can go to the hospital and know that her children are being taken care of, and she has a much better chance of getting well fast. It has been a very good service.

That's the latest service that we have done except that better than two years ago we did absorb the Travelers' Aid Society. Now there was a situation. There was a separate organization which didn't seem to be able to be getting where it wanted to get, or where the community felt it wanted to get, or where the national agency thought it ought to get. And we took it on a two-year trial basis to see if it could be worked in connection with ours, because they were dealing with families, too, and so were we. That's working very well. So that's a part of the organization now. That's the only instance where we took one on (chuckle) I think. We let them go. But it is working well. We have worked backward and forward.

**Interviewer:** That's very interesting.

**Miss Mullen:** But as I say, it has been a fascinating job. I still buzz around doing things since I haven't been working professionally. I still sit on a number of boards and still work.

**Interviewer:** I noticed one article I read about you, you were on the Rent Board?
Miss Mullen: Oh, rent control. I forgot about the rent control. Yeah, I did work on the Rent Control Board. That was interesting. It was fun sometimes. I did do that. I forgot that. I expect I've forgotten two or three of them. But it has been a life, and I'm never sorry that I did it. It has left me with a lot of things to think about.

Interviewer: I'm sure of that.

END OF INTERVIEW