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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH  
BERTHA WHITESIDE BROOKS  
EARLY ARDEN RESIDENT  
JANUARY 26, 1977

Transcribed by:

R. Herman

March 3, 1978

Interview with: Bertha Whiteside Brooks

Arden, Delaware

January 26, 1977

Interviewed by: Yetta Chaiken

C = Yetta Chaiken

B = Bertha Whiteside Brooks

C: This is Yetta Chaiken taping Bertha Whiteside Brooks, resident of Arden, Delaware for the oral history department. I think I can call you Bertie.

B: Oh yes

C: Bertie, when did you come to Arden and how old were you?

B: I came to Arden in 1907 and I was eight years old.

C: Where did you come from?

B: I came from Philadelphia. As a matter of fact most all of the people at that point were summer residents and they all emanated from Philadelphia.

C: All the people who lived in Arden?

B: Yeah at that point.

C: And why did your parents come to Arden?

B: My father...my mother was dead...my father came to Arden because he was an idealist. He was a socialist. The two are synonymous as far as I'm concerned. He came to Arden because he had been introduced to Arden by a neighbor of his closest friend who was a single taxer. And my father and his friend Charles Ervin and Mr. Sydel I think I'm right in Sydel, realized that this was a unique sort of development, a colony which would probably be a very delightful place in which to live where people who didn't

have money but had interests in things that were beautiful, interested in a social structure would come and get together and do things together and we could live simply and inexpensively. Arden was a single tax experiment and I'm not going to go into single tax. You're going to have to look in the history books for that because I've never understood it fully anyhow but Mr. Stevens, Frank Stevens and Will Price who was an architect from Rose Valley which is near Philadelphia, I guess he worked out of Philadelphia, and those two men evolved this idea after they had had a single tax campaign to try and make people aware of what single tax was. They decided it would be nice to have an experiment and they bought a farm in Newcastle County and I'm sorry I'm not sure whether it was...I think it was the Harvey farm...I'm quite sure it was the Harvey farm. They were aided and abetted in their plan by Joseph Felds of the Felds-Naptha Soap Company who took a mortgage on the Arden woods which later he liquidated.

C: Was that a part of the farm?

B: That was part of the farm. The farm has a great deal of woodland.

C: Is this house sitting on that farm land?

B: Oh yes, all of Arden. Now Arden town is another farm. Arden croft was still another farm and they came at different times and have different ways of governing themselves. We believe that Arden has the better...more...the better plan for the people.

C: Do you have a board democratic?

B: Yes. They all have town meetings as far as that goes, all of the three Ardens. But we are deeding from the original Arden which was this. Now what do you want to know?

C: Well, you were telling me what it was like when you came here.

You talked about Mr. Fowles.

B: Oh yes, yes. Well, it was my belief that Mr. Stevens, I must go back to that, and Mr. Price got their money back on a sale of the farm buildings. Maybe I should tell you this, Arden is not owned. The ground in Arden is not owned by anybody. It's in trust by three trustees. We have ninety nine year leases. We own our homes, we do not own the ground. There are some properties for rent, that's true which well, that's another story.

C: Are you opposed to properties being rented?

B: I don't like to have it become too great a thing. No, because they are absentee landowners, property owners and they're not people who are intrinsically...I shouldn't say that is an overall picture but I would say for the most part they're not people who have Arden in the best interest of Arden at heart and they are charging exorbitant rents. This is very far away from our original concept of Arden. We do have our town meeting and in that town meeting we have various committees, civic committee, safety committee, what you will, chosen by the people but we also have a board of assessors who evaluate what our properties should cost. This has been a little bit awkward because the Deed of Trust has a plan which goes one way and the county of Newcastle goes another. So, they evaluate our houses and single tax evaluates the land and the two are not consistently good because this is one of the fallacies of this but we're still going strong in spite of it. The person with a large house on a small lease-hold will not pull his weight financially where a person with a small house on a larger lease-hold will be paying for the other fellow. But we're so happy to be here that we kinda muddle along.

C: When you first came to Arden with your father, conditions were very different from today.

B: Oh, it was primitive. It was farm land and there were just a very few houses here. We had , oh, I don't know, whether there were more than a dozen houses or not. There was a building which was called the Red House which was owned by Mr. Stevens and which had a craft shop in which...I don't know whether they were making iron items at that point. They did later anyway, they were doing carpentry work there and very beautiful handcrafted furniture and so forth.

C: Did craftsmen live in Arden?

B: The people who came to Arden were idealists or artists, some musicians, writers. There were pretty high grade people at that point and for many years and we still have many that are now. But of course it's like any other thing, any other town that grows, you have a motley collection of people. You have people who are here just simply because it's a nice place to live and developers have not come in and we have open parkland and we have woodland and it's different. But not all of them are terribly interested in Arden.

C: When you first came, did you live here all year round?

B: Oh no,no, nobody came lived all year round that year. Mr. Stevens did very soon afterwards. He just might have that year. I'm not sure but if so, there were not more than two families. It...

C: They just used it as a summer colony?

B: Well, it wasn't supposed to be that but that's the way it started. because people had their roots, their jobs in Philadelphia.

C: And then eventually people started moving...

B: Oh yes and then there were Wilmingtonians that came out.

C: When did this become an all year colony?

B: Oh, very soon afterwards but there were just a few people at the time. I spent my first winter here in 1920. The winter of 1920 and am I wrong in that? I guess it was 1920 yes.

C: What were some of the activities you were involved in as a young girl?

B: Well, I was involved in having a good time but we...everybody in Arden was interested in the Shakespeare plays. They either acted in them or they watched them. The first year we had two Shakespeare plays. One was The Merchant in Venice. One was Julius Caesar and one week we'd have one and one week we'd have the next all summer long and everybody came to rehearsals just to look on and everybody came to the shows and it was a very enriching experience which carried on into my own children who participated in them too. As far as I'm concerned we had a very nice group of youngsters that did many things together. Oh, that first year we went in a natural pond beyond the old mill which is on Marsh Road and we treked up there and swam. Later we had a pool of our own in the Arden woods which we had for many years and of course had masonry and a dam and all the rest of it.

C: They dammed up a stream.

B: Yes and diving board and diving platform and so forth and it was a very happy spot in Arden for many, many people throughout the years until the developers came to be our neighbors and they didn't provide properly for sewage and so forth and we got all this sewage in the Neiman's Creek and we were regularly shut down

by the Board of Health because of contamination for a few weeks and then we'd start up again and then finally came the time when we were shut down for good and all and that was that. That would be what, about ten years ago?

C: Then you had to build a pool.

B: They built a pool and of course that isn't a democratic thing and a lot of people can't afford to go to it and for an outdoor pool it's nice because it is surrounded by trees and so forth but it isn't the same thing where all of Arden could go.

C: What about the houses when you first came, what kind of houses were they?

B: Oh, they were funny little houses. Yes, they were. Oh, they had this Red House of which I spoke which was...well, it was sort of a meeting place there. People sat outside the Red House in the summertime on the fences and under the cherry trees getting together in the evening and the Red House had a Miss Darling living there who had previously taken care of the camp boys which I will tell you about later I hope. She did very beautiful leaded glass. So, we had the leaded glass done in the craft shop and we had the furniture done in the craft shop. Later it became quite a crafty place because we had a potter. We had a weaving shop. But in the carpentry shop we always had dances after the Saturday night Shakespeare play which was done incidently in a very nice little open air theatre which is on a side of the green and it's called the Field Theatre, at least it was originally. More recently it's been renamed the Frank Stevens Memorial Theatre. We had...you know I'm rambling just exactly like that ram's story that Mark Twain does. Oh, that's terrible.



C: Well, you were telling me about the different kinds of houses.

B: Alright

C: You said...

B: Yes, there's the craft shop which was the first one and had the dances and then next to it were two little log cabins which had housed camp boys the previous year. Then came a log cabin which was called Cherry Lodge. All this is on Cherry Lane in Arden here facing the Green...the open Green. Then came the Ardenian which is where they had had...well, they had co-operative meals and so forth and they did have several rooms of course that people could stay in. We went down further and we came to a funny little shack, one room and sort of a bit of another, of course all this is without any conveniences, no lights, no water, no anything. We had pumps.

C: What kind of lighting did you have?

B: Kerosene lamps

C: And water, where did you get your water?

B: From the pumps.

C: On this property?

B: No, no, people went quite a distance to get it. We had a pump for instance at the Ardenian and at the time I came we didn't have a pump anywhere else in the immediate Arden excepting the town pump which was up at the corner of the Green.

C: What about...what other houses do you remember?

B: Well, there was...all the houses were named and came down to the corner of the Green and we had the Owl's Nest which is where I stayed my first summer and then we rounded the Green and there was nothing around the Green until we came up to the other side

opposite the Inn where we had the Field Theatre and behind it Mr. Stevens first home which was called The Homestead. The second home which was built several years later and not a summer cottage was also called The Homestead. Both The Owl's Nest and The Homestead had walls that opened up... I don't mean the whole of the walls and were propped up to bring the out of doors in. Of course there was mosquito netting on it. That was a very nice feature. Those are the only two houses that I remember that had that. Well, let's see, after we got to The Green, that is the corner of The Green where the pump is, that's where...that's Miller Road now and there was the house there that was called The Brambles and I think it had been a tenant house and next to it was a new house that had been built and owned by an artist named English. I know the son was named Frank and I'm not sure whether the father who built it was named Frank or not. I think so. Then there was a funny little house that had...it was like two little plastered buildings with a roof connecting them and a porch and that was where one of our first trustees, Mr. Martin lived, Frank Martin. Then the paths to the Willory Store...and the Willory Store came in 1910.

C: That was a general store?

B: Yes. Afterwards Mr. Willory became the post-master and he was a very great feature in this town. Feature is hardly the way to speak of a person, great personality. He carried us on the books and there were a lot of people that went through the depression with the kindness of "Uncle Bob" Willory and he...sometimes he didn't ever get paid too. He used to...he had a concession for the laundry work from Turner in Wilmington and he'd go around and collect in the early years before he got a car...he would collect

the laundry in a wheelbarrow and bring it back to us when it was done. He also came around and collected our kerosene cans. Filled them up and brought them back to us. My mother-in-law used to even charge money. She'd need some money and she'd get money from "Uncle Bob" and then come back on the bill at the end of the month, such and such cash she had had. But "Uncle Bob" Willory was loved by everybody but on the way to his store there's a path which was called Willory path and before his store was ever built, there were two little houses, cabins on either side of that. Now from the Red House over to Harvey Road was a lane called Milky Way. That was so called because the other side of Harvey Road on Milky Way...there was a farm house and for a year or two the original farmer lived there and people got their milk in pails by going through there.

C: Is this the Harvey farm?

B: Yes, I'm quite sure that was the Harvey farm. We're so inter-related with the Grubbs and the Harveys, I'm a little confused. I think...I'm quite sure that was the Harvey farm. You may need to double check that.

C: And that was the original farm house?

B: Yes

C: And that remained as a part of the landscape?

B: It's still there but of course you wouldn't recognize it anymore. Right below the farmhouse was a beautiful spring and still there and also an old, old, old cemetery in the deed of trust it must always remain. It is reported to have some Indian graves there. Now we have our own Memorial Garden further down the hill. But then going on the other side of Harvey Road, Milky Way then con-

tinues and goes to what is now the Arden Club which was then The Barn. I...we also had and this I don't want to forget, a sawmill which was just off Harvey Road and not too far...it was very close to where the Arden entrance while "Arden, You Are Welcome Hither" was to be seen and it was a stile with several steps up and down and it was hand carved. It's been duplicated. It is back to day. The other side of the entrance stile, "Arden, You Are Welcome Hither" is "If We Do Meet Again, Why We Shall Smile" and of course that came from Shakespeare when Brutus and Cassius were saying good-bye to each other when they knew they probably would die in battle. I didn't know that till I went to England in 1963 and I'd lived with it all my life and I suddenly discovered when I went to the Stratford-on-Avon production of Julius Caesar. At any rate, that's all beside the point.

C: That sawmill, was it owned by someone from Arden?

B: I presume that Frank Stevens was back of it as he was back of the craft work that was being done, as he was back of the Shakespeare, as he was back of the economics class which came along.

C: What was the economics class?

B: The economics class was held in The Field Theatre every Wednesday I believe and several years later Scott N who was pretty well known by many people, conducted the class. He was then Professor of Economics at the University of Pennsylvania. I was taken to that by my grandfather who took care of my brother and I....my brother and me? I have trouble with my personal pronouns...but he...grandpa was here with us all the time and my father came down in the middle of the week and the end of the week and he...

C: Your father still went to Philadelphia to work?

- B: Yes, he had a meat supervision job and that particular summer when I came here, Charles Ervin ran the Arden Inn. Charles Ervin paid the hired help and my father provided the food, bring it down in a couple of trunks twice a week from Philadelphia.
- C: Did you ever go to school here?
- B: No, I didn't but my daughters did.
- C: You finished school in Philadelphia?
- B: I was raised in Philadelphia and we summered here.
- C: And when you finished school you moved to Arden for the summer?
- B: Well, I got married very early and the first year of my eldest daughter's life we lived here in the house that was originally built by...not it wasn't...Upton Sinclair lived in it. It had been sort of a shack and he had improved it and that year...oh, there had been various summers but that year my in-laws were living there and we lived with them. That was up very close to The Field Theatre on what is now Green Lane and on the open Green. I don't know how anybody can get this picture.
- C: Have you been then living here regularly from the time...
- B: No, but nobody's ever had this house, this leasehold but the Whitesides.
- C: This was your father's?
- B: This was my father's lease.
- C: On this particular house?
- B: Yes, it was a summer cottage. It was a pavilion screened in and had one room, and the one room was for obviously for dressing, bathing and that kind of thing. The rest of the screened in porch we lived on, ate, cooked, slept, visited.
- C: And then after...

- B: My grandfather, my brother, and my father used to bathe in the Arden Creek behind the house. It wasn't the Arden Creek, it was the Neiman's Creek.
- C: And you didn't really come...when you came here to live, what did you do the the house then? This particular house
- B: Oh, this house my father started working on to make it a permanent home in the twenties. And then as needs arose the house became larger. Our house is named The Bougher.
- C: And so all the homes in this area that were part of the original Arden...many of them...
- B: Well, the little shack between the Arden Inn and The Owl's Nest, I think I spoke of, that was moved down next to our home in later years and so that's the nucleus of my neighbor's home, yes. So these three houses at this end of the Green in essence were the original houses but they just don't look like themselves at all.
- C: Has religion ever been a part of life in Arden?
- B: No, that was an individual affair. There's no reason why it should be a part of a community. We had many, many Jewish people who helped to found Arden and most of them as far as I can determine were brought here by my father Fred Whiteside and by Charles Ervin because of their interest in socialism and their many, many friends who were Jewish people. And they brought a couple of families here, very fine people, who brought their friends and relatives. So we had many Jewish people then and we have today and none of them were Orthodox Jews. I think their families had been but they had broken away. My father called himself an atheist. Frank Stevens dream was to have a little chapel here at one time which would just be a pleasant place to

drop in and commune with yourself. It never materialized. Right now, we have a number of Unitarians.

C: Religion, you still feel isn't any unifying force?

B: Oh no, no, no, no.

C: Do you believe Arden is the kind of place where you can lead a fuller life than living let's say in Wilmington or suburban Wilmington?

B: Oh, my word yes!

C: Why?

B: Well, there's a spirit in Arden that has remained of co-operation and kindness. People doing things together. We're not limited by keeping up with the Joneses. We can be ourselves. Am I right on this dear? It's different from any other place anybody ever lived.

C: You feel as though there's a special spirit here?

B: Yes, there is a special spirit and you find it out when you're in a jam. And I've gotten in jams more than one time and there were always people there that helped me out.

C: What about the teenagers here? What about the youth here?

B: Oh, we've had our problems. And this is the twentieth century and it's brought a lot of evils. I mean this half of the twentieth century. We had problems with drug addicts. We have our vandalism.

C: That's today.

B: That's today.

C: But many years ago...

B: Many years ago the spirit was just beautiful. We had this group of young people with whom I grew up and there was never a feeling of having to protect yourself from the boys. It was just...we

were good friends.

C: And so you do see a very decided difference.

B: That isn't all Arden. You'll have to admit that. There's a sexual revolution that's happened and stuff which we did not have. I don't mean that sex didn't exist in the world but in our particular group it was not a factor. We just had awfully good times together. We picnicked. We...you know...we just did things. We had co-operative...

The first side of the Bertha Whiteside Brooks tape runs out here in the middle of Mrs. Brooks' statement.



## SIDE 11

C: You were telling us about young people today compared with your days. What was it like to be young in your days?

B: Previously I spoke of myself as a teenager but when I was a little girl...when I first came here there was just one other little girl in Arden. I did forget there's another house that was back of The Field Theatre too, a little house in which she lived. But we played all day long down in the woods and on the creek and great boulders and we played house and, you know, and all the rest of it. I was a very religious child. I'd been raised in a very strict way and my mother had died and we went into a melodrama whereby she climbed up a tree and she was a little girl who died and I was the mother down there weeping and all that kind of stuff but we played all day long. Then came my own children and they enjoyed the Arden woods and they enjoyed the creek and they enjoyed Hopping Rocks which was a great past-time for us and for the next generation and even the grandchildren, the next generation. And even my great-grandchildren have been known...

C: How many generations of your family have been involved in living in Arden?

B: It would be the fourth generation, my great-grandchildren.

C: Well, but you had a grandfather and your father.

B: Oh yes, that would make five. Yes, grandpa, dad, my children, yes, five, six because the great grandchildren...because the great grandchildren come visit.

C: You have six generations.

B: They don't all live here but they enjoy Arden. All my children, grandchildren, my great grandchildren they come here and look at this simple little house, oh, it's beautiful, it's beautiful.

You know, I don't know, they just have a feel for it. But many, many of the young people who have grown up in Arden come back and if they don't come back to stay, they still have a very dewy feeling about Arden. And what the Arden School did to them too because it was unique.

C: Tell us about the Arden School.

B: Well, the Arden School was a public school but it was as a country school.

C: Was it a one elementary?

B: It was elementary and it went from first grade up to eighth and it was a two room school, four grades in a school.

C: In each room?

B: In each room and it was said by teachers who got these young people when they came to high school that the Arden children were more self reliant than most of the children that they got from other areas or other schools. There was a personalized relationship of it which was really nice.

C: How many children attended the school at one time?

B: How many would you say? Oh, I don't know.

C: Fourteen, fifteen, twenty?

B: Oh, maybe fifty.

C: Fifty at a time?

B: Uh huh and it was built with...I don't know how these things go but with Arden money, bonded or whatever and when the school was taken over by the state it was then used for a kindergarten for a while. Then when they no longer had it, they did turn it back to the people of Arden. It's now called Buzware Community Center. Buzware having been our trustee not too many years ago.

C: Has any woman ever been a trustee of Arden?

B: No, they haven't and I don't...it just happened. It wasn't planned I'm sure. There's one woman I'd like to see a trustee but she says she gets too angry, she wouldn't be good material but she is from every other angle.

C: But the truth is that women have played a more submissive role in Arden politically?

B: Oh, I...No, they're on committees. They're on committees and the town affairs. They haven't been trustees.

C: But they haven't been in leadership roles?

B: Well, we have a Gardener's Gild which turns out to be all women. We have Player's Gild.. This is all part of the Arden Club and they don't spell it guild. They spell it gild. You'll never know why. We have a Folk Gild which is very,very, very active.

C: Is that dance?

B: Yes and you have women active in that part.

C: But the trustees have been male.

B: They have been yes. It doesn't mean they always will be.

C: A trustee is elected for life?

B: Yes, they are. The trustee suggests the successor but then the town has to vote on it, on who may be a trustee.

C: What do you consider probably the most important thing Arden has given to you?

B: Well, my life has a richness that it never would have had under any other conditions.

C: And so you feel just living here has been...

B: Yes, it's a privilege to live here.

C: Well, thank you very much.

B: You're very welcome.