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Iron Hill School Oral History Project

Interview with Riva Brown – Claymont Stone School

Date of Interview: January 16, 2008
Interviewer: Roberta Perkins
Transcriber: Marcia Adams

Roberta: This is Roberta Perkins and today is Wednesday, January 16th, 2008 and I am here at the Claymont Stone School in Claymont, Delaware with Riva Brown. She is the educational director here at the Stone School and she has agreed to share what she has learned about the Stone School as a one room school and how she uses that information to teach the community and students about going – what it was like to go to a one room school and at this time I would like to thank you for taking your time to share this information with me. We are hoping to use this information as an additional resource for displays at our Iron Hill School Museum once it is restored. Can I call you Riva?

Riva: Riva is fine.

Roberta: Can you tell me what brought you to the Stone School?

Riva: Well I have always had a love of history and I moved to this area with my husband in 1990 and when we moved to this neighborhood in 1991 we went past the school every day, I was still working at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and on my way to work I would pass this building and I thought what is that building? It was in disrepair, it had a fence around it and they were fixing it up and I thought whatever that is, I would like to get involved and find more about it and eventually that happened kind of by accident. I am a Girl Scout leader and we have we

used to have our leader's meetings at Atonement Church in church and there was a sign saying if you would like to support the Stone School, sign up and buy a T-shirt. So I did, and Evelyn Tryon who is a mover and shaker in the community, didn't know who I was and she said I've got to find out who this person is so she calls me and she said, "who are you?" And I told her and she said, "oh you must join our Board! You must come in." And then Evelyn immediately called the other Board members and said, "we've got a live one!" So that was it and I came to a meeting and met them and began to volunteer with them and I've been here ever since.

Roberta: Okay.

Riva: I was here a few years before I actually made contact with Evelyn but I've been involved about ten years.

Roberta: And so can you explain or share with me how that involvement progressed? I guess you started doing some research on the school?

Riva: Pretty much. We had a book written about the school and so that was my first resource. I would read about that and then they had events at the Community Center where, it was informal, they would ask people to come and talk about their experiences. Many of the residents went to kindergarten here. It operated as a library for a long time and a kindergarten and so that was right when they still lived here so they talked about what it was like and I came to those interviews and I thought, oh isn't this interesting. Then the Board found out that I was interested in teaching and I had worked at a museum so they said well would you come up with some lessons and would you like to go to schools and teach about the school while our school is being renovated? And I said sure and I was at home with my children at that time and I had the time to do that and it was a lot of fun and they were very supportive and I helped them with the fund raisers and baking cookies and things like that. It was right up my alley. That's how I kind of got more involved. First I helped with the

mailings and reading the books, and oh yes, I can do all that and I had written lessons before at the Academy of Natural Science and I said I can do that here and so here I am, still here.

Roberta: That was great. What have you learned or found out about one room schools, in general, or is it more that you learned about the Claymont Stone School in particular?

Riva: Mostly it's from the Claymont Stone School's perspective, what happened here.

Roberta: Okay, that's great.

Riva: What I am surprised about in Delaware, I don't know if this is everywhere in the country but these schools are three miles apart. There are so many one room schoolhouses and a lot of the schools that are here today are named after the one room schoolhouse that was down the street and if you look around you can find some of these one room schoolhouses. The Mt. Pleasant Schoolhouse is a residence. The uhm I can't think of the name of it, its by Branmar it's the Ford School, it's still there, as a residence, they knocked down the, I think it was the Naaman's Creek School and that's now a Citizens Bank but they have pictures of it. The school is here, they are not that far apart from each other, 3 or 4 miles maybe so I think it is interesting when you think that kids walked to school, they didn't have to walk very far because there were all these schoolhouses in the neighborhoods and that's just in northern Delaware in this section of northern Delaware that these schools were used and still exist in some form, most of them, the ones that I have mentioned, so I find that interesting.

Roberta: Yes because it sounds like they were truly community schools.

Riva: Yes but my history, my research is basically about the Stone School. I have read a lot of books about other schools, anything that comes my way

– books about one room schoolhouses - I will read it and the experience is like different you know because it might be a school out in the middle of the prairie which would be different than this which we are not in the prairie, this was a farm land community but the surrounding area is a lot different so what the children were learning, in some ways they still learned their 3 R's but they didn't – the experience would have been different for them just because to get here you could jump on the trolley but if you were out on the prairie there was no trolley you know so certain things were the same, certain things were different.

Roberta: Tell me a little bit about the Claymont Stone School. What were its dates, when was it first built and used as a school?

Riva: The land was deeded by John Dickinson and we do have records of that. It was built sometime around 1805 and their provision was that certain board members had to serve, certain people had to serve as trustees of the school board in order for him to donate the money and he gave the land to the people of Naamans Creek, which was what this area was called then, for five cents. So that's what happened and then this school, the community built this school. So he gave us this quarter acre parcel which we still have today and it was originally a one room school then the neighborhood changed drastically in the 1900's Allied Chemical came, a Texas company came, Worth Steel was built in 1917 and suddenly this rural community that had lots of farms and a lot of, this was a vacation area for wealthy Philadelphians – massive houses were here – suddenly it was no longer a place to vacation, it was a work place. We had all these industries and a larger schoolhouse was needed so in 1905 they knocked down the southern facing wall and they added the second section for the children who would need the school and then they added a second teacher at that time. It gets a little confusing there, which grades were taught, it seems that they had a split shift of what grades would come in the morning

and what grades in the afternoon. I'm not really clear on that but they did operate it with many grades in two rooms.

Roberta: Okay, all right, very interesting.

Riva: And then in around 1924 they build the Green Street School which is about five blocks away from here because there was still more students and they couldn't keep them here but while that was being built children would go to school in different school buildings – I'm sorry, church buildings – and there was a community area called it's Indian's - the Redman's Hall and that's where Lamb's Loft is now and they went to school there and they built what was called the Tarpaper Shanty on the end of Franklin Avenue so kids were going everywhere while these buildings were being built and then the Green Street Elementary School was built and the middle school was built and the high school was built and the Stone School closed. By 1928 it reopened as our first neighborhood library.

Roberta: Okay so when did it close as a...

Riva: It would have to had close around '24or '25 was the first – the high school was opened then so it remained closed for a few years then the library, the Women's Club of Claymont opened and then in 1930 they were approached to begin the state's first public kindergarten and they did that. They had the kindergarten in the morning and the library in the afternoon and then in 1962 the schools were built Darley Road and Maple Lane and then the kindergarten was out to those schools Darley Road is up the street, Maple Lane is about a mile away and this continued as the library and I believe it was 1975 it was incorporated into the New Castle County Library System. It remained here until 1988 when we had a huge ice storm and the walls of this building shifted and a huge stone boulder shifted and the ceiling began to cave in and the building was deemed unusable, unsafe so the library moved out to the Claymont Community

Center which was part of the Claymont High School, that building had changed purposes over the years and this was going to be knocked down and Julie Shenk who was on the school board said we need to save this building and then Carolyn Burlew who is a teacher in the area, she said yes, we have to save this one. She talks about a Louis who was a teacher and somehow Bruce Govatos got on board and the three of them met in Carolyn's kitchen and decided they wanted to save the school and that's where it really began – the history of the Stone School to the present day, in it's present condition. So it was three community members saying you're right, we have to save this historical building.

Roberta: I'm thinking at the early time of the school, when did the State Board of Education become involved, setting standards and all that stuff?

Riva: I know that in 1875 the State Superintendent set standards for all schools in Delaware. I know that there was actually a, I don't know if you would call it a convention but teachers were required I believe it was to Dover for a week long session so that they could all be tested and take courses and they had to become standard in what they were teaching. I know that was in 1875 because I read about it and I thought that was pretty progressive for Delaware that they would say, hey we need to have state standards and there were, I do have documents of, I don't remember the man's name but he wrote about the conditions of the schools and how poor they were and some schools you would have good resources and in other schools you would have nothing and this is where they needed to be standardized if we were going to teach our children correctly so I was pretty impressed that Delaware did that.

Roberta: Do you have any idea from your conversations with people who went here to school what it was like for teachers in the area?

Riva: I know that some of the teachers were siblings of the children who went here so they went to school here and then they graduated and went on for

further education and came back as teachers. It must have been very unusual to be well maybe not, maybe they were used to disciplining their younger siblings but it must have been kind of odd to go home with your family and maybe even live with your family and then go back the next day and be teaching your siblings. We have a picture from 1893 or '94 – I think the teachers are related some of the children are [inaudible] we have it labeled. It might not be from 1893 but Miss Otley was related to some of the Otley children who went to school here so I don't really know what their lives were like I just know that they were related but not all the teachers were related because we did have ten teachers, I'm sorry, there were a number of teachers in a short period of time. The turnover was great, it was like every six months or so but some moved on to other schools in the area. I have a document where you can see where the teacher might have taught at [inaudible] and then came here for a year or two and then went out to Naamans Creek and then out to a different school.

Roberta: Do you know why that was?

Riva: No, I don't know why they kept moving them. Maybe the salaries were better. I really don't know. It is a puzzle to me that they did move the teachers every couple of years.

Roberta: A career move?

Riva: The men, the male teachers, were paid ten dollars more than the female teachers, I noticed that but some of the teachers if they stuck around for a while they got paid as much but the women teachers had to be here longer, I noticed that too.

Roberta: That was ten dollars per month or?

Riva: That I can't recall. It probably was per month but I don't know for sure.

Roberta: With the research that you have done then how do you use that when you have people here for presentations?

Riva: Usually I teach children about what it was like to live in the 1800's, what it was like to go to school in particular and what I do is I try and learn as much as I can about what life was like and then compare it to their life. Like I begin with like you know, I tell them what the area was like, I show them pictures and I say, look around the room – why did the kids have an hour for lunch? Do you have an hour for lunch? Why did they have an hour for lunch? And they guessed and some of them eventually get it and if they don't I say well where is the cafeteria. I don't see a cafeteria here – where is the cafeteria – and they say well, uhm, well could they go to the Boston Market you know, down the street and they say no – McDonalds, right, they went a little further to McDonalds and they say no, they had to walk home or maybe they brought their lunch. I have stories from Jane Huntington about how they walked to school and that they carried hard boiled eggs or hot potatoes in their pockets and Mr. Bigger who lived to be over 100 he was interviewed quite a bit and in his journal and the State Line Review and he told stories so I have their stories and I pull those stories in and I might not necessarily say Mr. Bigger said, but I know for a fact that they did walk with hot eggs in their pockets and hot potatoes when it was cold so I know that they brought their lunch because then they would put it on the cook stove and keep it warm and sometimes the teacher would have soup cooking for them and hot chocolate and for a penny or two you could buy the soup or the hot chocolate and that's from Mr. Bigger that particular you know. Miss Passmore was a Quaker teacher and this is what she would do. We would talk about that with the kids so I take the information that I have learned from these stories and I try and compare them to the lives of the kids today. Okay, how did they bring their lunch to school? Well they brought it in a lunch bag. Really? Like you have an insulated lunch bag, plastic, nice lining with one of those little cold packs you stick in there? No. Well what are we talking about

then? So I joke around with them a little bit and then sometimes I ask them to get up and look around the room and find what the lunch came in or how did they get their water – they find a bucket with “the cup” and they all go yeww they all drank out of the same cup. And then I ask them to think about it where did they get the water from and if they are from this area, they know. There is a river down there. There is a creek behind. There was a pump out front here, they can guess these things even if they weren’t from the area – there’s got to be water here somewhere. Yeah, there was and there still is. Sometimes I ask to look as they are driving away, can they see the river and [inaudible] comes down they will see the creek and as we are driving up Darly Road you can see the creek if you pay attention as you’re driving you can see these things. So that’s some of what I do – I compare life today to life yesterday and get them to think a little bit.

Roberta: Have you been able to piece together like with this particular school, what a school day might have been like?

Riva: Not totally.

Roberta: Okay.

Riva: I’ve got stories from different people telling me what the teachers were like and I think you know one of the things a teacher was good in a certain topic besides the 3 R’s then they would bring that into their lessons. One of the teachers was nature; she would bring them outdoors all the time. They were always exploring the creeks, the Kruse Farm, etc. Other teachers would have different interests.

Roberta: Right.

Riva: It really depended on what the teacher’s knowledge was, what her interests were. Miss Bicker would get her kids down on their hands and knees with a yardstick and they would measure the perimeter of the schoolroom and

Mrs. Morton told us that, that was her story that she remembered and can you imagine that, crawling on your hands and knees doing math, which is what we used to call arithmetic and then they learned square footage and I know they had declamation contests because she told the story of how Miss Bicker would let them stand at the front on the room and she would stand at the back of the room and she would say, "I CAN'T HEAR YOU – PROJECT!" and they learned to speak correctly with decorum so these are her words and if you were punished at school you were punished at home and I told the story of how Miss Bicker one day got perturbed with an eighth grader who was not behaving and she called the child up. Now Miss Bicker was always prepared apparently and she would ask one of the good students to go outside and get a switch from the lilac bushes that grew on the side of the school and she would put that lilac switch on the front of her desk just waiting for it to be used and of course the eighth grader was a goofy thing. So she called him up to the front to switch him on the calves and I guess he was in "a mood" and when she tried to hit him, he jumped and she did it again and he jumped and she did it again and he jumped and the kids of course could not show their pleasure so when I have students today come I tell that story and when I have the Girl Scout groups come they get to act out that story. So everybody gets a role and I said what do you think happened because I don't know what happened afterwards – did she send him out, did she punish him? What would the punishment have been because punishment wasn't always being hit. We discuss that too, do teachers hit them today; how do teachers discipline today and they discuss that and I say well some teachers might have similar disciplines like some of the boys might have to sit on the girls side of the room; you might have to sit on the chair; you might have to wear the dunce cap or the **[inaudible]** board, you might...you know. Your teacher might be coming home with you because she might be living with you for two weeks so your family would know and if you don't think your family would find out – you go to school with your brothers and

sisters – do you think they are going to keep quiet about it? So you know, all of these questions I ask the children.

Roberta: That's really cool. Did the school have a library you know like in the beginning we were just talking in general.

Riva: No, I don't know what resources they actually had. I'm not sure.

Roberta: Okay, alright, so I'm going to ask it anyway if you're not sure about the resources but what they used for class work, just paper and slateboard, did they have textbooks?

Riva: Well I know that some schools had the McGuffey Readers and I know that those were certain types of books. What I talked about with the children in general was that I know in Delaware everybody did not have the same thing so from that I have extrapolated that they could have used different resources and I have read that in one room schoolhouses they have used the Bible, children might bring in books from home and I have the kind of books that were read at that time and different resources but not everybody had every book. The teacher might have the math book but then he or she would recite the problems to the children, the children would write them down and then solve them on their slates. This schoolhouse did have a board on the wall but we don't have the room for it so we don't have the original board so we have slate.

Roberta: What about health care? How was dental, you know, nursing, that kind of thing, do you have any information on that?

Riva: No, I don't have any information about that. I know in Boston it was a different story. They had health, they had dental care, they had a lot of things associated with the schools but there they were in a tight knit city and they were able to do things like that. Here I really don't have any information.

Roberta: You mentioned about the discipline and this has always kind of interested me, where did the dunce cap come from?

Riva: I don't know, I really don't know, that's a good question. People always feel kind of stupid with it. Well, we have a summer camp and one of the great things that we do is let the kids pretend to be teachers. By the fourth day of summer camp they are done and I say okay it's time to play school and everybody chooses whatever role they want and the big thing of course is to be the bad kid and get the dunce cap put on your head and I've got this kid, he was in eighth grade last year, he's parading around with the dunce cap on his head but I don't know why the dunce cap. I am sure that there would be someone who does know, it probably goes back in history you know, like an apprenticeship thing or if you don't know anything maybe you would wear the cap and maybe as you learn you get a different hat, etc. That's a guess. That's just off the top of my head but there probably is some historical significance or reasoning behind that particular hat. It kind of looks like a wizard's hat except that it's not. Maybe because it's white instead of black.

Roberta: That would be interesting to find out.

Riva: It would, it would be interesting.

Roberta: I have a couple more questions I want to ask you and feel free to inject anything. This is great, I am enjoying it. What do you think, people seem to be kind of fascinated by one room schools, you know, kind of interest. What do you think is the interest?

Riva: It reflects a bygone era, a simpler time you know when we can look back, you can romanticize – you weren't in that one room schoolhouse – you weren't getting disciplined. Oh yes, the free and easy time but yeah what about waking up at four in the morning and doing your chores and it was really cold and you know but it's still romantic because it's not our lives

you know and it was a time when we look back when children were seen and not heard, they respected their elders, they grew up to be you know respectful members of the society and I think we look back to traditions and say you know, hey we've lost some of that wouldn't it be nice to regain some of that but I think there is a romantic vision. It also represents the beginnings of this country and what that means, I should say the beginnings of the United States of America because the country was always here. There were people here before but the country as it is now so I think people romanticize.

Roberta: This ends side 1 tape 1.

Roberta: This is side 2, tape 1.

Roberta: One thing I wanted to find out – what makes this enjoyable for you? You know, I mean the research? Doing a presentation you know? What makes your heart sing when do it?

Riva: It's a lot of fun for me. I come from a theater background. I am a jack-of-all-trades. I did acting, I did props, I did research, so it fits the things that I enjoy doing and I love doing crafts and I have found that children don't get to do crafts in school anymore, there is no time. So I am having an elementary school coming and they are doing a Valentine's Day lesson. I talk fifteen minutes about Valentine's Day and then we just make things. You know it's neat to see kids – I like watching the kids learn; I like watching them experience things; I like giving back to them you know. I got to make crafts a lot in school so I guess I went to an old fashioned school but for me its just having all of my talents and interests be pooled together and being able to use them.

Roberta: Where did you go to school?

Riva: Temple University.

Roberta: Okay so you are from, are you from this general area?

Riva: I am from northeast Philadelphia but that's where my family settled but we moved around a lot. But what happened is you marry someone from Delaware and you get transplanted and they will never leave. It's true, try, try and make them go somewhere else, they'll do it for a year or two or maybe five but they'll be back and that's the way it is, they always come back home. Its strong roots. Very strong.

Roberta: I think it kinda goes back to like I said, Delaware is still an agricultural state and by that I mean, that's just it, you stayed close to home, families, extended families.

Riva: Well when we bought the house here it was a house that, well the owner's, his mother had owned it, he moved over the next block, he and his wife raised their children in the next block and he was kind of sad that his children moved on because he had hoped that it would go to them but when he saw that my husband and I were a young couple starting a family, he was very happy you know, hey I'll sell it to them because again, its family, you're going to stay in the area. My kids won't move. We were going to because we had another child but oh no, no. Okay you know its Delaware. It's the way it is you like your neighborhood, you like where you are.

Roberta: This has been a joy. This has been an absolute treat. I can't think of anything else.

Riva: You can always call me and I look up some of those facts that I am a little rusty on.

Roberta: Oh great. Then I can just write them down and stick them in a folder. Oh, wonderful. Thank you.

Riva: You're welcome

Roberta: This ends my interview with Riva Brown.