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Interview with Mrs. Anna Driscoll at her home in Wilmington, Delaware, March 17, 1971, by Myron Blackman. Project: Delaware in the Depression.

Q All right, Mrs. Driscoll, what is the first thing that you remember, the first time the Depression ever affected you?

A Well, it affected me as a teacher, in one way. The teachers had to give up a part of their salary to go for relief. And we were getting very poor salaries to start with, and many of us were not college graduates at this time--I think I told you the other day that there was no woman's college in Delaware until 1914, and after 1920 they had a Delaware School Code and then the teachers started to work for degrees, or to raise their standard of certificate. They had a standard then in the elementary school of first, second and third grades, depending on your education, you know, what you had had before. So that stands out in my mind as a teacher of having a part of our salary taken for relief. They promised to give it back to us, but we never got it back. And the salary stayed poor until after the Second World War--during the Second World War. And many teachers left teaching and took jobs otherwise to get better salaries. So they had to do something about it, teachers became so scarce that the salaries began to be raised then, and things got better. And of course we went on to the University of Delaware, taking extension courses, working for a higher grade certificate, or some of us worked for our degrees, and received our degrees there. And so that helped us, but by that time the Depression was getting over. But in our schools--I was in a rural community in New Castle County.

Q What was the name of the school?

A The school was Rosehill School. And the parents of the children were in many cases truckers, they had small truck farms around there. Since it's been built up in developments, I guess five or six developments have been laid out there. And some of the parents worked in industry, places of industry in Wilmington, and they supplemented their living by running these truck farms, you know, worked that part of the year.

Q What grade did you teach?

A I taught first grade, in our building at that time--it went up in 1930, I believe, and I was there from 1925, then, housed other places. But we had a new building that went up at that time. And I always taught first grade after we went there. Before that time, I had taught first and second. And of course, the parents being out of work, the children lacked food and clothing. We had a visiting teacher--we called a visiting teacher in the county, and we'd call upon her if children were staying home because they didn't have clothing, and she tried to get around various places and go to the home and take clothing and so forth. And one of the parents, I remember distinctly, who his father had had a good job before the Depression came, was laid off, and I can't remember whether it was a change of administration or just--they just didn't have the work for him. Anyway, the woman had eight children in ages between one and 16 years of age. And she said her children were just not getting enough to eat. So she made soup

and sold it to make a little bit, you know. But they came through the Depression all right. I saw the children later and they had a nice car, riding around in, brought me home from a viewing one night. And we were glad to see them, you know, come through it all right. And another man said jokingly that he never wanted to see another white potato as long as he lived after the Depression, that he'd lived on them during the Depression. He had several children, too. And so it was just things of that kind that--the help of the visiting teacher, we would notify her, and of course the teachers would take clothing that they had from--they got other places, from their own families or nieces or nephews or things of the kind, and give to these needy children.

Q The visiting teacher was someone who worked for the relief agency?

A No, the visiting teacher was employed by the State Board of Education, and she saw to the attendance, you know. That was her main job, but she did this other, too. Any disciplinary problem or any attendance problem, we turned over to her right away.

Q When things started getting bad, did attendance drop?

A Yes, because they wouldn't have clothing to come to school, and then we'd notify her, and we'd do what we could ourselves.

Q Did the children realize this? Did they . . .

A Well, I don't think so, exactly. I don't think so. I didn't see any difference, they played and had a good time like they always did. I can't see any actual suffering that we knew of. Of course, they could have been hungry and we didn't know it. We didn't have a cafeteria at that time and the children bought milk--the dairies sold milk there, brought in milk, and we took orders ahead. But when this condition got bad, the Parent Teachers Association paid for milk for the children that were actually needy.

Q Did the Depression, hard times, affect your teaching curriculum at all?

A No. Of course we were constantly trying to change our curriculum for the better, you know, improving it, I'm trying to say, improving our curriculum. We had very good supervisors. We were closely supervised, even in those days. And the state superintendent in charge of elementary schools saw to our course of study, and we were improving that all the time. We had good schools and good teachers at that time.

Q Did the children ever tell you stories about their home life, or . . .

A Well, they would if you'd question them. But in the first grade, I can't say that I had many cases where they told you about it. I never tried to quiz the children anyway. Some teachers had a knack of getting it out of them, but I didn't. I never tried, particularly. You could find out other ways. The type of lunches they brought--one teacher told me actually that the children in one family, and I think there were seven or eight of them, had the sandwiches with lard on them--you know what lard is--instead of

butter or margarine, and that was a rather extreme case, that their lunches were not very good, you know, that they brought from home. We didn't have the cafeteria as I say. Many of the fathers were working, and some of the children were well-fed, well taken care of in every way.

Q Where were you living during the Depression?

A In Wilmington, most of the--well, let's see--I was in an apartment here in town. I was married and lived in an apartment here in town. We came in this house in 1937, out here. I was married in '23 and began teaching in '25. And of course the panic came, the crash came in '29, and we didn't see the effects of it right away. I remember buying a fur coat that fall, so it hadn't struck too hard. But by the '30s, early '30s, we did begin to feel it.

Q Was your husband employed throughout the Depression?

A Yes, he was, yes. And so was I, so we didn't have it too bad.

Q When did you start noticing it in Wilmington?

A Well, in the early '30s, as well as I can remember.

Q What was it like?

A Well, I don't know. People just didn't have money to do things. Stores were not doing a whole lot. You'd read in the paper how bad things were, things of the kind.

Q Did you see any bread lines?

A Yes, there were soup lines here. I can't say that I--I think there was one down here on Concord Avenue, people have told me, but we didn't move in here 'til '37 and that was gone. But I think there was one down there, a bread line.

Q Would you say that you got through the Depression O.K., it never really affected you financially or . . .

A No, I can't say it did. My husband's work fell off, but he was--he could get another job, or . . . he was a piano tuner and I know he took in the Wilmington Schools, to tune their pianos at that time, which didn't pay very well. But his business fell off some. Now, right at the beginning--well, he was doing very well just before that. Everything was booming, you know, there for a while, around 1927, '28, around there. We were married in '23. Things were booming just before '29, you know. And then things gradually fell off in his work. Of course I was teaching all the time, and as I say, wasn't getting a very big salary, but it came in regularly.

Q Were you--I asked your brother, Mr. Jones, about the change of presidencies, from Mr. Hoover to Mr. Roosevelt. Do you remember that?

A Yes indeed.

Q What do you remember?

A Well, Mr. Hoover, of course everybody--a lot of people were against him, you know, at the end. He didn't seem to make things move at all, you know. He kept talking that the prosperity was just around the corner and it never came, so he was grandly defeated.

Q Did you expect much from Mr. Roosevelt?

A Well, we did. He had a very calming influence, I think, on everyone. People had confidence in him. He used to give his Fireside Chats and made us feel better, and things gradually got better. I think a lot of his things that he did worked. Some people say things didn't get better until the World War, another World War came, but I certainly think that he started a lot of things that helped people.

Q Did he do anything specifically to help the schools?

A I don't recall that he did, no. I don't know. I can't say right off what he did for that. I don't remember whether we got hold of any government money or not. Maybe we did, I don't know.

Q There were no lunch programs started, or . . .

A No. Well, that came later. Free lunches came later, but I don't know whether it was under his administration or not. But we did get the free lunches after a while, and that got to be a big thing, and especially after we got the cafeteria in our school, after we went in the new building, as I told you, in 1930 or '31, there was money donated for free lunches and food sent in, you know, all kind of things--cheese, butter, meat and all that sort of thing.

Q Were you acquainted with any of the children's families?

A I knew them all perfectly well. I knew them all. We used to have to make home visits, and we visited the home right along. I don't know whether it was just at the beginning of the Depression or not, but we did do a lot of visiting in the home. And many of their homes were not so good, but anyway the children were warm and comfortable there. We had some very nice homes in the community.

Q I was wondering about--some people that I've spoken to have told me that as bad as the condition of their family was, their parents would refuse to go on relief, do anything, you know, in their power to keep from going on relief.

A Yes, I think many people didn't want to go on relief at that time. I've know of that around--not only in my community but other places, where they hate to go on relief, have a certain amount of pride, you know, they didn't want to go on relief, not clamoring for it like they do now.

Q I ask most of the people that I talk to if they had a radio during the Depression.

A Yes, uh huh, we had a radio.

Q Do you remember what you listened to?

A Well, I don't know what we . . .

Q You mentioned the Fireside Chats.

A Yes. Well, we always listened to that. We listened to what was going on most of the time, as much as I had time to. I was a hard-worked person. I had up to 45 children in my room at one time, and as I say, we were closely supervised and we'd better have our lesson plans ready when the supervisor came in. So it was my way of doing things the best I could anyway, so I didn't have so much time to listen to it. But my husband was blind, and he listened to the radio all the time, he just lived by it, until I tell people that I just shut my ears to it, except when I had time to sit down and listen to it. And Saturday nights, why we'd listen to it. But I can't say just what we did listen to. I know we never missed one of Roosevelt's Fireside Chats, 'cause we were both ardent Democrats.

B [Unidentified person, possibly Mr. Driscoll] There was Gabriel Heatter.

A Yes, Gabriel Heatter, he was a news commentator then. Gabriel Heatter, did you ever hear of him?

Q No. The name sounds familiar, though.

A My brother could tell you more about him. He broadcast especially during the World War, the Second World War, and he was very encouraging always--say something, you know, encouraging.

Q Was he one of the newscasters who was in Europe, who would broadcast from Europe?

A No, he was broadcasting from this country, wasn't he, he wasn't in Europe. I wish I could remember the names of the people. I should be able to better than I do, but I don't.

Q Well, most people . . .

A Who was the one who was killed over there, or that died over there, was such a--do you remember who that broadcaster in Europe, that was over in the war zone and died or was killed over there? He was killed, I think, and he was listened to.

Q I know of one in the Pacific, Ernie Pyle.

A That's who I'm thinking about, Ernie Pyle, yes. It was in the Pacific, that's right.

Q Most people remember--they don't remember much, but they remember listening to the old comics, Amos and Andy. A large number of people listened to [inaudible].

- A Yes, um hmm. I just--as I say, I didn't have very much time for it. I know Saturday nights we'd listen to Guy Lombardo and a few others, entertain us. I wish I could recall it, but I can't.
- Q Did you ever get to the movies much?
- A Yes, I went to the movies quite a lot. But don't ask me what I saw. I had passes to the Playhouse most of my married life. My sister and her brother were newspaper people here in town, and my brother died with the flu--he was managing editor of the Morning News, and my sister was society editor. And after she married and went away, I was married and my husband's brother-in-law was business manager of the News Journal. So we always had access to some passes, you know. And Wilmington was quite a theater town in those days. They tried out the New York shows here for years, they reall did. And we saw the best of them.
- Q You don't recall any, though.
- A Oh, let's see . . .
- Q Any musicals, or . . .
- A Oh, I did, but I just can't say now. I ought to be able to remember it right off, but I don't. David . . . oh, what was his name . . . I saw him in a half a dozen--he was very good. Just when I want to remember, I can't.
- Q It's funny nowadays what they're doing in New York and in other cities, in larger cities, they're having revivals of W. C. Fields movies and the Busby Berkley musicals, 42nd Street, and things like that. And also, you know, movies of the '30s and '40s that I'm acquainted with, sort of secondhand.
- Q Yes. David Warfield is who I'm trying to think of, David Warfield was one of the big actors at the time. And I saw him in all of his shows, Return of Peter Grimm, that's one that I remember well, some of the Shakespearean plays--I wish I could recall, because he was a great actor of the time.
- Q Who was your favorite movie actor, do you recall that?
- A Oh, I guess we all liked Gable, and I don't recall too much that I saw, if any of 'em.
- Q Did--you started teaching in '25?
- A Yes, um hmm.
- Q And how long were you teaching, how long did you teach there?
- A I taught 32 years straight then, I taught 32 years. But before that, I had taught five years in Sussex County, quite sometime ago, beginning in 1909 to 1914, I taught in Sussex County. And then I returned to teaching in 1925 and taught straight through for 32 years. I had 37 years service in Delaware as a teacher.
- Q Then in a way you started in a very prosperous period and went through a

very . . .

A Yes, up in New Castle County, yes.

Q Did you notice any change among the children, according to the times? Was there any . . .

A I can't--except in their clothing and things of that kind.

Q I imagine with first grade it's difficult to tell.

A Yes. You wouldn't notice so much in the first grade. I was at a wedding anniversary one night and a young man who was the son-in-law of the people who were getting married said, "Mrs. Driscoll, do you remember the Depression, how our children just didn't have enough to eat?" And I said, "I certainly do, Harry, I wondered if anybody else remembered it." He said, "Well, I do." He said, "My dad had a job all the time," and he did, and he said, "We had enough to live on, plenty to live on," and they did. But he said, "Some of those kids really had it tough." And I said, "I remember it," and we went on to recall the milk being bought for them and things like that, in the school.

Q Did the Depression at all change any goals you might have had? Some people before the Depression wanted--well, one person wanted to become a millionaire, he figured that in ten years he'd be a millionaire, he was big on something, and the Depression turned it around and he became a songwriter instead. He didn't have any money. Did the Depression have any affect on you?

A Well, you mean the children, or . . . well, no, I think--no, not with me. I wanted to be a school teacher and I stuck to it and was satisfied with where I got and what I did. But it didn't change us any, we made out all right, and came through.

Q Did you know any people that were affected?

A Well, yes I did. I had some in my own family, in the cities, that were affected by it. My sister's husband lost his job with a DuPont subsidiary in Newark, New Jersey and they had a real tough time. And they came through it, though, came through it. My sister finally died, they're both dead now. I guess that was the closest to me that I really had to worry about.

Q Do you think, going through that time, seeing how it affected the children, did it change anything in you about the way you looked at things, the way you felt about things?

A I can't say that it did. I mean to say, I was always a fairly optimistic person and it was certainly too bad that things [happened] the way they did, and of course we were all interested in what was going to be done to remedy it, and we appreciated the things that were done, you know, the things that they did to save people's homes and closing up the banks at the right time and getting things straightened out that way, why we appreciated that.

Q You've seen quite a few generations of youngsters . . .

A Yes. Well, I had two and maybe a few three generations in my school. Well, if the children--some of the children went on, I had a few of them, right at that time, go on and go through school and go through college.

Q If a depression occurred today, do you think that the generations that have born since the Depression, the post-Depression generation, how do you think they would react to a depression compared with the people in the '30s? Would they do better or worse?

A Take a little more dope, maybe. I don't know, maybe it would do 'em good.

Q Why?

A Well, things were--people had too much money this last few generations. Children were raised too easy, they didn't know what responsibility was in many cases, most cases. They had everything. They didn't have to reach for anything much, like we did and like their parents did.

Q Is it important to not to have things, to maybe strive for things?

A I think it does you good. I don't mean--I don't think poverty does anybody any good.

Q It's a question that I've been thinking about, too. And in a way, talking to these people about the Depression usually gets into this kind of conversation because it's an important relationship between prosperity that I grew up in and poverty that . . .

A I think that these children just have had too much, you know. They went flying too high and they didn't know--they don't know what it is to earn money yet. They don't know what it is to get out and earn money, like we did on a farm--picked strawberries for a cent-and-a-half a box to get our spending money. They don't know anything about it now, many of 'em--maybe some do, I don't know. I'm worried about who's gonna cut my grass this summer, and there are a lot of able bodied young people walking around here getting into mischief, lookin' in my window at night and so forth. But when it comes to getting the grass cut, the man who's been doing it is getting too old for the job--he was just a neighbor, really, at one time. Of course I paid him, always, but I don't think he's anxious about doing it; he doesn't have to, he's well taken care of; he's still working, really, in one job. And these people walk the streets up and down here, I expect I'd ask them to cut my grass, they'd say they were looking for somebody to cut theirs, that's the way they answer you nowadays. Yes, they'll do it.

Q Then you think that work is important in developing into [inaudible]?

A I certainly do, I certainly do. How else you gonna develop? How else are you going to develop? I think it's very important to work, work some kind of work, some kind of responsibility, not just going out and whooping it up all the time.

Q Do you think that the Depression has taught the country or the people a lesson?

- A Well, it seems maybe it did not. Maybe it didn't teach 'em a lesson. But those children who came through the Depression turned out very well. They came through and they made good citizens.
- Q Hmm. One of the criticisms of that generation has been that they came through the Depression and felt want, felt the need for something, and strived to get, you know, better homes, money, get security, and maybe that has affected their children . . .
- A Laid too much stress on that, perhaps and wanted to do more for their children, yeah. Well, that might be right too. But I still think that people should have responsibility. How they gonna develop character and anything if they don't. Everything handed to them.
- Q When I asked you that question before, you said you didn't think that the Depression has taught a lesson. But you sort of implied that it could have . . .
- A Well, they don't know how to take care of their money. They don't know how to do it. They don't know how--you go to market and see some of the people, I won't mention race, buying just loads and loads of food, you know. And I heard one the other day said, "Give me two pounds of that ham," sliced ham, said, "my children eat a pound of that every night when they come home from school," just for lunch, before dinner, see. And then she went on to say, "I didn't take the roast out of my freezer, I want to take it down to my grandmother this week," and so forth. See, they don't know what it is to not have, maybe.
- Q I see. And the Depression could have taught them that?
- A I should think that anybody, you know, that came up through the Depression would know better than that. And I think most of the people I know that went through the Depression know how to handle their money better than that. What do you think? Don't you think people that came through the Depression handle their money better, most of them? I don't know, but most of my friends who lived in those days handle their money well.
- B In my day I bought a horse, carriage and harness working for 75¢ a day. It took me about three years to pay for it. The first year I saved \$30.50. I went to school that year and just worked, you know, between schools. But then I went on and gave \$125.00 for the horse, \$65.00 for the carriage, and I believe \$12.00 for a set of harness. Took me three or four years to pay for it.
- A He was living at home, too, not having to pay any board.
- B Well, no, I didn't have to pay any board, because I lived at home, my mother and father, or father--they hoarded it, and that was it.
- Q Do you think that--your experiences were so different, living on the farm, and you were living in the city, were you glad?
- A Well, yes, I liked the city after I came up here, yes. I liked the city. Various things happened to make me come up here, but I've always been real satisfied in the city. I think there's more opportunities up here, and I like the people, and have done all right, as far as Wilmington is concerned. I was engaged to be married and the fellow was killed and that's one reason made me come up here, change, just to make a change

you know, I came up here--stopped teaching down there and came up here. And my parents were getting old, I couldn't expect them to keep me all my life, so I came up here. I went into another profession, as a matter of fact, I trained as a nurse, and graduated and worked in the nursing profession--well I went right back teaching first aid for the Red Cross, home nursing first aid, in the schools for six years. So besides that, I was eleven years going through training, two years private duty nursing, and six years with the Red Cross, made eleven years. Then I went back teaching school 37 years--so I worked altogether 48 years. And counting my six years, it was 43 years actual teaching, with my six years with the Red Cross. But under the State Board of Education it was just 37.

Q [Inaudible]

A I think my last days in teaching--before these new developments were built, people back there that went through the Depression with me, or me with them, the teacher was always right, you know. You didn't have any disciplinary problems to speak of, or any trouble with the parents. And the parents would help us out. But I noticed in my last years out there, when these new developments began to start, grew up and people moving out there, the parents seemed to be entirely different. They were very different, very different. They wanted their children to have their own way, you know, they got this permissive kind of spirit, you know, to let children do as they pleased, you know. And I think the trouble began right there. And so we were not allowed to give 'em a spanking or to touch 'em anymore, you know. Whereas before, it had been all right, you do what you see fit, that saves the teacher.

Q I was also trying to get at, was there cooperation among the families, among themselves, helping each other if one was in need. Did you . . .

A Yes, they would come across, they would always do. If we asked for help or something of the kind, we would always get it. People cooperated very well, I'd say, in our community.

Q Did you ever get any children from migrant workers, who would come into the school for maybe a month . . .

A No, we didn't have that at all. Not up here in New Castle County. We didn't have that at all. There's no special crop that I can think of right now, but you know, these people raised truck--it was brought in and disposed of, a lot of, in Wilmington here. They'd stand in the market, if you know what that means here in this town. We had a King Street market and the farmers brought in their truck and sold it right there to the customers on the street, certain days of the week. And many of them were Italians, and a few Polish. And that's the way they disposed of their crops, and we didn't have any coming in. The children worked, helped in summer-time, you know, do what they could.

Q I assume that you're also a Democrat, Roosevelt. And the impression I've gotten was that Delaware and even north in Wilmington, New Castle County, is mostly Republican.

A Yes. Sussex County is, too. Nowadays--it was when we were children, it was.

Q Was there much opposition to Roosevelt?

A No, there wasn't much opposition--of course there was with a certain class of people who had money, you know. They said he was crazy and everything else they could say about him, but being elected four times, you know there wasn't much opposition to him.

Q How did the children's parents feel about . . .

A They were Democrats in those days, most of them. There were a few leaders there, Republicans, and still are, of course. But there were many Democrats out there.

Q O.K. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]