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Interview with Marion Ecker, June 23, 2001

Marion Ecker

Michael J. Birkner
Gettysburg College

Interview Participants

Interviewee: Marion Ecker, Teacher in the Gettysburg Area School District
Interviewer: Michael J. Birkner, Benjamin Franklin Professor of the Liberal Arts & Professor of History, Gettysburg College

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Description
Marion Ecker was interviewed on June 23, 2001 by Michael J. Birkner about her life as a resident of Adams County. Ecker discusses her childhood and education at Shippensburg State, as well as her teaching career in Gettysburg. She also discusses her connections to Gettysburg College, especially the Plank family.

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Disciplines
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MB: This is Michael Birkner and I'm sitting at the home of Mrs. Marion Ecker at 48 E. Stevens Street in Gettysburg PA. We are going to be talking with Mrs. Ecker about her life experiences in Adams County and specifically in Gettysburg and we will touch upon her relationship with the family of the Planks in Gettysburg.

I wanted to start, and if I didn't say it, today is June 23, 2001.

Mrs. Ecker, I was going to ask you if we could talk about your upbringing in Adams county. I understand from a previous conversation that you grew up in Adams county, though not in Gettysburg. Why don't you tell me about your parents, whether they were originally from Adams county. What were their names and where did they come from?

ME: My parents were Robert and Mary Garretson and they lived in Flora Dale, Pennsylvania, a very small village, Quaker village between Biglerville and Bendersville, Pennsylvania. I grew up in a fruit-growing community. We had fruit trees on our farms and I was a member of a family of 8-4 boys and 4 girls in the Garretson family. We had a wonderful childhood and growing-up experience. My father believed in being educated and so he had the theory that the older ones in the family would finish college and help the younger ones go to college by their having a pretty good paying position when they finished college. But things didn't work that way because it became Depression time in 1932 and I was #5 in the family and at that time there were 3 older ones in the family in college...an older brother at Penn State and 2 sisters at Gettysburg College. And so my 4th member of the family, my brother, who was content to stay at the farm, he really didn't care about going to college, but I was #5 and graduated from Biglerville High School in 1932. There was absolutely no money for me to go to college, so for a year I worked as a nanny in a family in Biglerville, the Meyer family, Meyer family. Mr. Meyer was vice president of the Musselman Company. They had three children and they were wonderful people and it was a rewarding experience for me. So one day at the table, Mr. Meyer looked at me and he said, "Marion, I think you should go to college. I'll give you the money and you pay it back with no interest." So I borrowed $800 from Mr. Meyer and went to Shippensburg State College, at that time, for 2 years. Lived in the dorm, had a wonderful college life, did everything I wanted to do.
there. Took part in all the activities—hockey, basketball, paper, newspaper reporter. Then at that time I was able to get "State Standard Limited Certification", which meant I had to go back to college and get more credits each three years to continue teaching. I had an elementary degree, but I was fortunate enough to get a job in a two-room schoolhouse close to where I grew up. At that time it was either a one-room school you taught in or a two-room school. I was lucky to get a two-room school which consisted of the first four grades and was able to live at home. My brothers took me to school every morning and then they went to high school.

MB: Where was the school located?

ME: School was located in Aspers, Pennsylvania—just about a mile and a half from where our home was. And so, I paid the $800 back in 2 years. Then in that time I taught at Locust Grove in Aspers for 3-1/2 years and a position opened up in Biglerville in the grades. And that was a divided grade situation—two grades in one room. So I was lucky enough to be elected for that position with about $50 more on top of my $100 a month salary, which is what I received in those days teaching. I taught down there about three more years and at that time I was planning to be married and in those days married teachers were not allowed to teach.

MB: In the Depression.

ME: In the Depression and as soon as you showed signs of being pregnant you were automatically out of a job, of course. So I was married at Christmas time and I asked if I could teach the rest of the year which they allowed me to do.

MB: What year was that?

ME: Well, 1938, I guess. Because I was out of school 6 years, I missed a year of college by working in Biglerville, so I was married and didn't plan to teach of course and had my family. That's when I was first married, my husband and I lived in New Jersey for a short period of time. He was connected with the Western Union at that time and we lived in Perth Amboy, New Jersey for half a year until a position opened up in Gettysburg. So the reason we moved here, at
this home, it had been his home, it was a very unique situation at this house. His grandfather owned the property. His grandfather and my husband’s father lived here—two men. Women had died in the family and so they had a housekeeper so my husband and I moved in. As a young bride I lived with 3 men. Three years later our first son was born. Then there were four generations here, that I was responsible for, so I was weary and meanwhile, I was also thinking about going back and working off on credits for my degree. Grandad Wetzel, the oldest member of my 4 generations of men worked at the Gettysburg Academy and later at Gettysburg College as a custodian. He walked to the Academy and College for a number of years at 4 o’clock in the morning to get the furnaces hot for the day. When he retired he was given $75 per month for his many years of service. Grandad Ecker, my husband’s father was a cabinet maker of the “old school” and refinished antiques for many years. His furniture was all hand made—inlaid work on the tables, sewing cabinets, etc. He also hand decorated chairs in the old designs and made several styles of mirrors—many with paintings in reverse at the top of the mirrors. He worked for many “people of class” in Gettysburg and outlying districts for many years. When my husband was no longer a part of our family Grandad Ecker continued to live with me (as the home owner at that time) and my two children. He was a wonderful family figure for the children and a big help to me till he died at 86. We, as his family, share a house full of his beautiful furniture.

MB: If you don’t mind, what I’d like to do at this point is back you up a good ways, and talk with you a little about growing up. Then we’ll come back and cover some of this ground again. I want to know more about the circumstances of your life growing up in northern Adams county. For example, what was the closest house to your house where you grew up? How far away was it? Was it a good distance?

ME: As the crow flies it was a short distance and it was across from fields and we had a nice hamlet of houses, called Flora Dale, which consisted of a post office, which was directly below our house, run by two maiden ladies, sisters. We had one business establishment in Flora Dale which was the apple-packing establishment run by the Tyson Brothers. They serviced and sent apples to the community and other states—supplies for apple packing and things like that so that’s how we were able to have a post office in Flora Dale.
MB: Would you mind if I ask you for the purposes of, if we ever transcribe this—how do you spell, what you just said? Flora Dale?

ME: Two words — Flora Dale.

MB: OK. Flora Dale. And that was what the section was called?

ME: Flora Dale. It was in Quaker Valley...section. Quaker Valley Road which is right below where Flora Dale proper was. We had a school.

MB: You had a school?

ME: Yes, our school was named Fairmount School. All eight of us received our early education there.

MB: It sounds like a very rural town. Did you have a general store?

ME: No store. We had a Quaker meeting-Menallen Friends Meeting.

MB: Was your family Quaker?

ME: My father was a birthright member of the Quakers or Friends. My mother was a Lutheran so as children we all went to the Quaker meeting, the first day school, as it was called. We could walk. We went right up the hill and it was close to where our school was. And that’s where my parents are buried—in the Quaker cemetery there. I also went to the school which was at the top of the hill, which was called Fairmount School. It was a one-room school and I went there for 7 years rather than the 8. I (it was)...I don’t think it was because I was particularly bright, although I was a good student I guess, and loved to read and all, but they used to just put the 2 grades together sometimes if there were 2 or so in a grade, they would lump them together and if you could go on you’d go on. And of course you learned from others, because you watched everybody..blackboard and all their activities in a one-room school but we had a wonderful time. We had 4 ponies at our home. My father had a riding horse. We had these 4 ponies; they were not Shetlands, they were bigger ponies...mother and 3 colts. We had 2 carts—two-seated cart and a little racing cart that we drove. And we could ride the ponies. We had pups and cats, all outdoors. And a beautiful family life.
MB: That's what I wanted to ask you a little more about...because your grandchildren and great grandchildren obviously grew up quite differently and people don't realize the degree to which people/kids made their own fun. You didn't have all the electronic gadgets and all the television that we have today. I mean, you had to make your own fun, didn't you?

ME: Yes, we had our own baseball diamond, baseball, and pond that we ice-skated on.

MB: Sounds like fun actually.

ME: And our father was very progressive. He received 3 newspapers and many magazines and was well read. He had an electric system put in our house, generated before an electric system went through the neighborhood. And I never knew what it was to not have a bathroom in...or to be without a furnace in the house, which is very, very unusual- that many years ago.

MB: I'm sure that's true for Adams county.

ME: We had a lovely house with about 6 bedrooms and a nice sleeping porch. Just had a wonderful time growing up.

MB: Is the house still standing?

ME: Yes. It belongs to a nephew. A nephew and his family live there.

MB: What's the address?

ME: It's now Carlisle Road.

MB: It's now Carlisle Road? (north 34 out of Biglerville)

ME: Flora Dale went out of business a few years ago when they took down the signs for the post office, but we also had a teahouse in the post office. Flora Dale Teahouse, a lovely teahouse, run by the 2 sisters who had the post office. And my sisters and I were their waitresses.

MB: May I ask you how they got any business?

ME: By word of mouth. They didn't have any advertising. They had business from Shippensburg and Harrisburg.

MB: Get out!
ME: and all around. They took reservations and they had delicious food. They served wedding receptions and it was a wonderful experience for me to go there and see them be able to serve food so nicely, because my mother was a wonderful cook, but our food was cooked for a large family, although, may I add that with 8 children in our family—we always ate in the dining room. We had a BIG dining room table and I didn’t know what it was to eat at a kitchen table until after my mother died when I was 15.

MB: I have a lot of different questions I want to ask you and you’ll just have to be patient with me, because we’ll take our time and do some of these. I want to get a sense, for example, of when your parents actually married. You said you were 5th of the children, so it sounds like they were married in the first decade of the 20th century. Is that right?

ME: Their wedding date was April 7, 1906 at the Lutheran church in Bendersville. The minister was S.A. Diehl.

MB: OK. Somewhere between 1900 and 1910, I’m thinking.

ME: They were married a little late in life. My father was an older father to have 8 children. He didn’t get married until after his mother had died. He lived with his mother after his father had died. They lived in a house up in Bendersville which is now Kime’s Cider Press Mill. Then moved down to Flora Dale and he had first bought another farm up in Quaker Valley which was always our tenant farm then. We had the two farms. And at one time when he felt the crunch of college prices and so on and with three in college he bought another farm, which was over another hill, to get more income in from apple crops and so on to educate them. He sold that one first of all but the other two farms are still in the family.

MB: What did he grow? Did he grow apples or other things?

ME: Apples, peaches, cherries.

MB: You probably did a fair amount of picking?

ME: We had to help to do everything. We knew how to work.

MB: So the kids pitched in when things needed done, whatever needed done. Whether it was planting or watering or picking or whatever.
ME: We had school for just 8 months in those days, you see. Didn’t have it longer because they thought we were needed on the farm. We had to go in the fields and try to dig out mustard. My father was so particular. Whenever I see fields of mustard I think about working in the fields and digging out mustard and things like that. Also taking out potatoes in the fall. But we weren’t slaves. We just know how to make hay, tramp the hay down, and we had threshing machines to take the grain out of wheat stalks and oats...seed halves, you know. That was an experience when those big threshing machines came in, one or two days.

MB: Were these people who would go... itinerants who would go around the county/country with their machines and then connect to the farmers and do their threshing?

ME: Yes.

MB: That how it worked. It was common in the U.S. I assume you fed those people when they were at your home?

ME: Bless her heart, my mother had to give them breakfast and a meal at noontime and an evening meal. She gave them three meals a day.

MB: Yeah, I believe it. Now, did they in those days have festivals when the crops came in. We talk today about the Apple Harvest Festival. Did that stuff exist back when you were a little girl?

ME: No.

MB: So it was just do your business, really, and go about life.

ME: Yes. And my father was very protective. He didn’t believe in taking us a lot of places, and so on and so forth. We lived on the farm and we stayed on the farm. We didn’t have any money to spend, we didn’t have any allowance, or anything like that. And coming back to the fact that we didn’t have a store, we, of course, were self-sufficient growing most of the things that we ate and had need of. We, of course, had hogs that we butchered. Butchering day was quite an occasion, too. We also always bought a beef—good-sized beef—and fattened it and we had beef, you know, to subsist on. There was a store about 6 or 7 miles from where we lived, up at Brysonia. You know where Brysonia is?

MB: Heard of it, sure.
ME: And that man came around once a week with groceries in his truck and my mother would call and order in what she needed. So she bartered with him and gave him the butter that she made from the cream that came to the top of the milk from the cows that were milked. And eggs that we had. That was part of the money we paid for the flour, sugar, and few things she needed to get from the store.

MB: Fascinating. Now, of course, you did have to have some decent clothing to go to church in or go to school in. Did your family have a routine where every few months you drove to and went to stores in Gettysburg or to Camp Hill or Harrisburg or anything like that?

ME: My mother couldn’t sew. She didn’t have much time to sew, with cooking and other work she had. So she had a woman come in, maybe spring and fall, to make us clothes, a seamstress, so to speak. And we got hand-me-downs from other people, people in Philadelphia and all that. But my older sister grew up and learned how to sew. She made beautiful clothes for me as I was growing up, but I didn’t have many clothes, but on one else did in those days either. When I went to Shippensburg I was poor, but everyone was the same as I was.

MB: Right. I gotcha. In those days people didn’t have the assumption that you’d have 5 pairs of this and 6 pairs of that. You didn’t have big closets or anything like that, right? It was a much more modest kind of thing.

ME: That’s right. That’s right.

MB: When you think about your childhood do you have memories of all of you sitting around the table for meals or all of you sitting around the table to listen to the radio. Are there any particular family memories that are strong in your mind that bring back either a chuckle or a good feeling?

ME: I guess Christmas and Thanksgiving were particular times. Now when I think back on it we didn’t have regular birthday parties. We probably had a cake, but we didn’t have friends in or a lot of hooplah like children have today. We were just a family bonded unit. And my mother and father were very hospitable and the home was a welcome place for all of our friends. And they all enjoyed coming. My father would say there was always room at the table. And my mother would have plenty of food. And we had cousins and people who would come for a couple of weeks at a time. We were the
envy of a lot of our cousins, with the ponies and the pond, and so on and so forth like I said. And so we have many fond memories of occasions like that.

MB: As kids, did you get along with each other?
ME: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

MB: Who were you closest to?
ME: Well, fortunately, the range was—oldest was a sister, a brother, another sister, another brother, then I came along. Then I had a sister right behind me. She and I were very close. We played together a lot and bonded together.

MB: What was her name?
ME: Edna.

MB: Is Edna still alive?
ME: No, there are five of us who are living out of the 8. The Third oldest one in the family, Martha, is still living and celebrated her 91st birthday last June. But Edna, my younger sister, was a wonderful person. She lived in Gettysburg and had two sons who went to Gettysburg College. They were brilliant boys who were history majors.

MB: Wonderful.
ME: Eyler was their name, Clifford and Truman.

MB: I think I knew Clifford.
ME: Did you know Clifford?
MB: It could be he was in college in the 1970s—unless it was a grandson Clifford, but I knew a Clifford Eyler in the 1970s.

ME: He was a smart boy.

MB: I hope he still is.
ME: Well, I’m disappointed. He didn’t pursue what we thought he should and so forth in Philadelphia.

MB: I remember he was going to go off to do graduate studies but I don’t know that he ever did.
ME: He didn’t finish.

MB: But, that’s you know, everybody’s different. Now, can I ask you since you mentioned that your elder sister who is alive is 91, what your age is?

ME: I am 86.

MB: Congratulations! I would have guessed you’re much younger. You do something right. Maybe you grew up right, too. You also do something right to keep yourself in such good shape. Now, I wanted to ask a little bit more about your parents, for a second. Was their pleasure primarily this hospitality that they offered to others or did your father have a regular night where he went out with the boys or played cards with your mother or something like that?

ME: My father was his own boss and he was not, I guess, smitten with us to a degree, but he wasn’t as close as a lot of fathers are. For instance, the youngest one in the family, my youngest brother, said he considered him almost a grandfather to him. He never felt that close to him. He lost himself in reading and working, you see. And he had no associates really as far as men-friends or co-workers. A few relatives who were older or visited in our home, but their life revolved around the family. (MB: OK.)

ME: That’s really it.

MB: Was church a significant part of your life? You mentioned that your father was Quaker and your mother was Lutheran. Were you exposed to Lutheran services also?

ME: No. No. As I said we walked to meetings as we were growing up, and I was the only one who really ever joined Menallen meeting. I wasn’t a birthright member like my father was. So before I wanted to join the Society of Friends and I was married by the Society which is really a unique experience, too. We married ourselves. There really is no minister. But I was the only one who joined. The rest joined with their husbands or wives where they attended, you know. And so we branched out. But when you asked about us going and getting clothes and going to Gettysburg—we rarely knew what it was to go on trips to Biglerville, but my father did get one of the first cars around. I don’t know what that make was, if it was a Chandler? He always had big cars. He went out to Ohio with one of the Rice men from Biglerville
and drove that car home. Of course it had the pull-up seats in the middle which we needed for that many children. And after we had the car we went for drives around in the countryside and that was a nice experience for us. We got out a little more then, in the country. But I used to wonder where my father got his money from. Did he have it in barrels? Because you never heard anything about money. We weren’t given any money to share or anything like that. So it was just he was very, very quiet and very self-centered, in a way, but yet in a nice way, but I always had a lot of respect for him. He lived to be 86 years old. Our mother died at 49, very young.

MB: Did he remarry?

ME: No. No. Our mother fell over from a heart attack. 49.

MB: That was awful with all those children.

ME: Well, the two youngest ones were like 9 and 11, brothers, and at the time we thought they’d be all right, because I was home at the time and so was sister Edna, I guess, so, of course, we had to take over and run the house, which I had to do when I was teaching because then my older sister died, who was home managed the family affairs. But be that as it may, we managed. But these boys have since been talking to me and the one brother who’s here in Gettysburg and the other one in Georgia (he’s the one who’s farthest away from the rest of us) - have said that they sort of thought of him as a grandfather. He was a manager and kept them under control and that sort of thing, you know. But the funny part about his cars- the last ones were Packards. When he no longer thought the car should be a passenger car he cut the last one off and made it into a truck and used it to drive around and around in the apple orchards - to go around and see all the fruits.

MB: He was pretty smart.

ME: We laughed about that and thought about that many times.

MB: He was a practical man. Let me ask you again about money. You said something very interesting when you said really as a child you didn’t hear talk about money or see money and get to stores, but a some point you had to be aware that a nickel would buy a candy or admission to a movie, or something like that. At what point do you become aware that you can use a few cents here and there to get some things
you want to get or do things you want to do and when did you get your first opportunity to make some money? Was it at the tearoom or what it before that?

ME: As I was growing up, several summers I went to a farm and they transported us in trucks (about 7 or 8 miles from where we lived) to pick beans that were in a field for canning and that was my first money I made.

MB: Were you allowed to keep it?

ME: Yes, and also I picked strawberries in another farm close by for about 5 cents a quart.

MB: What did you like to spend your money on?

ME: Don’t remember.

MB: Well, let me ask you this. One of the memories of a lot of senior citizens I talk to, not necessarily in Gettysburg, but wherever I’m talking with them, is going to the movies on Saturday afternoon. Was that part of your life at all?

ME: I didn’t know what a movie was until I was pretty well grown, in high school, I would say, and we had a movie theatre in Biglerville. And I went to see my first movie in Biglerville, which wasn’t too far, two miles from where we lived. And I went to Biglerville to high school. Sometimes we had to walk to school. Until (they) somebody in the family was old enough to drive, cause we had a car, too, then by that time.

MB: Did your father own a radio? A radio in the living room and did you all listen to it at night?

ME: Yes, later on we did.

MB: Sounds like a fairly simple, but pleasant life where you didn’t have a lot of distractions and a lot of temptations. You just did your work and did your play and you got about it. You did it and enjoyed it. Now, when you were growing up you went to the school house you mentioned, then you went to Biglerville High School in the 9th grade? Did you like high school?

ME: Oh, yes, I loved playing basketball and I was in drama work
there, newspaper staff and all. We were, if I may say so, the cream of the crop because of our good exposure with books and magazines.

MB: Cause in those days not everyone went to high school.

ME: I graduated from Biglerville High School - Class of 1932. Everybody didn't have the advantage of having newspapers and magazines around to be exposed to. And books. We had an aunt who was a nurse. She was a nurse in WWI. Was over at France in World War I. She lived in Philadelphia. She was a matriarch of our family later after our mother died. And she was quite a character. So she used to send us birthday gifts such as pencil boxes, crayons, etc. for our birthdays. That was special, too, you see. So we did have some contacts with some outside people, but we were very self-centered as a family. And grew up that way. I say that we're pretty close nowadays, those of us who are left. We see each other and the picture behind you is a (indication) of one wedding. And that's a picture, only one we have, of our whole family, with the exception of our mother who was not living. This was an older sister's wedding, who was still living. And the family was all there except our mother who had died, so I had it enlarged for everybody in the family.

MB: Well, I think that's splendid. I want to look at that when the tape clicks off. Let me ask you a silly question. But one I should ask anyway. What kind of apples did you grow and did you like to eat them?

ME: Oh, absolutely! I still love apples. I still chomp at them, eat raw apples. And make many things with apples. And I do know my apples. Well, their varieties have changed a great deal now. Some of the older varieties are no longer in existence, and so on and so forth. Yes, I like fruit of any kind. We had apples, plums, pears, and peaches. Right now they have a lot of apricots at the farm, too. And as I said, cherries. Picking cherries. And picking things like that, that we had to do because we had sweet cherries and sour cherries, and of course, it was then helping to can them. It wasn't preserving them. It wasn't freezing them in those days. Everything had to be canned. And that was a chore. In summertime, there was no end to what we had to can for a family of 8.

MB: Did you have a basement where it all wound up?
ME: We had a wonderful basement! Our house had a basement that was lived in. It had three or four rooms in it. And years ago people used to go to the basement in summertime when it was hot and have their living areas right down there rather than going up where it was hot. And we had 3 or 4 rooms down there for different things. My father had a furnace put in, too. As I said I never knew what it was without that. He also had running water pumped in from a spring before there was refrigeration. It was our milk house with running water in, and fermented area. And that's where the milk was kept and the butter was kept and food that could keep for a day, maybe. And that sort of thing.

MB: Did you have an ice house or anything like that?

ME: We had an ice house. Cut ice off the pond in wintertime and put it in sawdust and that's where we would keep some meat in summertime. And, of course we made ice cream.

MB: You did?

ME: Oh, yes.

MB: That must have been a good memory.

ME: It was. We would churn the ice cream, you know. We would go down there in our bare feet and keep a little bit cool, too. So the ice house was just knocked down a year or so ago and I have a picture of it, before it was demolished, you know. Fond memories. Many things like that.

MB: That's wonderful! Now did you have, when you went to Biglerville, a new circle of friends that you made, because, you know, you were in high school with them and saw them every day, or did you pretty much stick with your family?

ME: Oh, no, we branched out. We each had our own......made more friends. That wasn't any problem just because we were sort of sheltered at home. We've all had our own close friends and associates. We were all outgoing enough that, you know, I'd say that we welcomes everyone in our home. I think you interviewed my brother Cameron Garretson.

MB: One of my students did, yes.

ME: That's it. I suggested you go to him after you interviewed me about WWII. Well, Cameron is still living and he will be
89 years old in August. He is quite an active person. He and his wife are just wonderful people. They do a lot for the community, Bendersville, Aspers, and around there. Grace was a retired teacher as I am, too, see. She’s done a lot for education. They are very nice and then my brother, Marshall, who’s here in town worked for the research lab in Arendtsville and was retired from that and he is enjoying retirement. Has a wealth of friends. He’s a people person alright, too. Everybody out there says what a wonderful guy he is, too. He still goes out to the lab and to the orchards where they can’t sell the fruit. But the people who work there can pick it, so he brings us all these wonderful apples and peaches, and apricots and nectarines in. Takes them to his friends, and yesterday he came around. Had brought me a box of strawberries last week, from someone in Upper Adams who grows the strawberries and said he was going to get some this week. I said bring me four boxes. I’m going to make some strawberry jam which I haven’t made for a few years. And so he came and I said, “How many boxes of strawberries did you get to parcel out?” He said, “10!”. He takes them around— a box here and a box there and so forth. And that’s the kind of man our father was, too. He was very generous. And he had a lot of good feeling in his heart for his tenant farmers because they had tough getting along in the Depression times. And he would share what we had with them, so that they had enough food sometimes. So he was not the kind that was too standoffish. He just had his own way.

MB: Now, I want to go forward a little bit. You’re at Biglerville High School and you’re enjoying about everything you do. You’ve got some sisters who are at Gettysburg College. Did your sisters ever talk to you about Gettysburg College and what it was like being college students?

ME: Oh, yes. Actually, my oldest sister didn’t graduate. She stopped, but the one who is still living is the graduate...’31, I believe it was. She was, of course, active and she lived a house down Stratton Street for a while. Didn’t commute, you know, lived in town. And she joined a sorority, I think, when she was in college and she was dating somebody in a fraternity. I was in high school. Somehow or other I was supposed to date one of her friends at a frat party. It didn’t materialize but that was a big disappointment for me. I was looking forward to that, because I was still in high school.

MB: I understand.
ME: But, no, she didn’t share too much of her college life with me.

MB: Do you think that if you had not had family financial troubles during the Depression that you would have wound up at Gettysburg College like your sisters?

ME: I’m not sure. I wanted to teach elementary and Shippensburg Afforded me that type of education.

MB: Shippensburg would have been the likely place anyway. So you really got to go because of the generosity of Mr. Meyers, you got to go to Shippensburg. I want to be sure I understand what you told me when we started the interview. You told me that with the loan from Mr. Meyers you spent two years at Shippensburg and then got a job, but then because of state requirements you had to go back a little bit.

ME: Go back to school?

MB: Yeah. Yes.

ME: I had a limited degree when I went back to teach and was off 13 years and had 2 children I was taking care of and a houseful of men, and so on and so forth. They needed teachers badly and they kept calling me and calling me and I went to interview to think about it a couple places and I thought I have as much as I can handle right here with the children and these older men and all, so I declined all this, until, 1954. Just before Labor Day I had a call from a supervising principal in Littlestown asking me whether I wouldn’t consider coming down to teach. Offered me a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grade and this was really about 5 days before Labor Day. So I thought it over and thought it over and I thought, well, our daughter is, at that time, to go to second grade and I tried the second grade to think about the tie-in, you know. She could help me think about what she was doing and so on and so forth. So I went down on the first day of school, the day after Labor Day and walked in cold (as I had not been in the building before.) I met the principal and the principal was greeting people in the lobby and he looked at me and said, “Are you a parent?” And I said, “Yes, I’m a parent, but I’m also your second grade teacher.” (Laugh) So I taught down there for about 3 or 4 years and went back to Shippensburg, pretty strenuously. Filling my time. On Saturdays and summers. And was able to work off my two years with credits until I got my degree. Then I could apply in Gettysburg School system where they
hired only graduates who had degrees. And I was given a job here. Then I decided I would continue my education so I did my graduate work on top of that. It was all out of my own pocket, because there were no credits paid by our school system in those days. So that was a struggle.

MB: But you did it.

ME: I did it.

MB: So how long did you teach in Gettysburg?

ME: I taught 19 years in Gettysburg. I finally had 30 years in. When I hit my 30th year I was teaching remedial reading at that time, the last 8 years or so, helping children who have reading problems, and had 4 wonderful aides in my room. It was a good situation and I was still enjoying it, really helping the children. So I just thought I was really one of the older teachers in the building, of course, matter of fact, they called me Mother Ecker most of the time and I thought I'm going to bow out before I'm wished/pushed out and still have some time. So I did. I retired after 30 years.

MB: As the tape clicked off, you said about your teaching in Gettysburg and you discussed how to go out. You put it very nicely that you "bow out" rather than wish you out. I think maybe that's a good idea for me, too, in the teaching business although I'm not quite at retirement yet. I wanted to ask you a little about the Plank family, that was one of the reasons I called you, I was asked by the Adams County Historical Society if I would chat with you about the Planks. What is your first remembrance of the Plank family in Gettysburg?

ME: My husband was a very good friend of Eddie Plank's son, Eddie the III's father. They grew up together and I'm not sure if he attended the Gettysburg Academy. My husband did and they were pals. And so that's when I first knew Eddie Plank, Jr. and then as we got married and Eddie and his wife Isabella were married we became friends and did some things together. And that's some of my earliest recollections.

MB: Where did the Planks live? Did they live in town? Did they live on Carlisle Street, on the corner of Carlisle and Broadway?
ME: I did not know them then. My son was a member of the fraternity over there where the Planks house was.

MB: Phi Sigma Kappa.

ME: Yes, my son was a member of that fraternity. No. I'm a little vague about it because even though we were friends as they were first married and we were first married, I was still very busy because I had...After we were married 3 years our older child, our son, was born and with the men here and all that, you know, grandfather and great grandfather for a while, I just wasn't out into the swing of things as much as I had time to be associated with them. We didn't go out as much then, but we did go together out to Marsh Creek Heights many times. The Planks had a cottage at Marsh Creek Heights. Eddie and Paul used to go out there and they did more together than I and the 4 of us did. I honestly can't tell you where...I knew them when they were first married, but my closest relationship was when they lived over here on Lincoln Avenue. And it was Eddie III's grandmother who lived there, Eddie Plank's widow. I knew her very well. And I used to go to see her and her daughter-in-law, Eddie Jr.'s wife, who lived with her when Eddie III's father was in the service.

MB: During World War II?

ME: Yes. He was out of the country, of course, then and that's the time that Eddie was born. Eddie the III.

MB: I'm assuming that Eddie Plank the II is no longer alive. Is that right?

ME: The father of Eddie the III? No.

MB: Not alive?

ME: He's not alive. And I'm not sure...I don't think...his mother's alive. She's never mentioned-do you know anything about it?

MB: No, I don't. I just know that Eddie III has been in Gettysburg a couple of times because of that having to do with Eddie Plank getting that plaque.

ME: Can you tell me what's he doing?

MB: I know he lives in Maryland. I believe he's a graduate of Gettysburg College.
ME: Why, I sent him a letter in Harrisburg.

MB: Well, you might be right and I might be wrong. I have never checked. I thought he had come from Maryland, but could be that it’s Harrisburg. We can check on it for you because he would be in the alumni listings of the college.

ME: I got his address from the historical society.

MB: They would probably have given it to you right. I just misunderstood. So Eddie the III...was he the only child?

ME: Yes. He was the only child and he was born when his mother was living with her mother-in-law, Eddie Plank’s widow, over here on Lincoln Avenue. That’s when I knew them best of all. Eddie the III was a little boy and he was born about, I think maybe just, several weeks or a month before my daughter Molly was born. So that they grew up a little bit together around here. She remembers him, too, and remembers him in school. And that’s why I wrote to him, but I haven’t heard from him. So whether he doesn’t want to get in touch with me, I just explained to him that I knew his grandmother, of course, the best of all, and so on and so forth. I’d like to talk to him and invited him over for lunch or just to visit.

MB: That’s wonderful. It’s hard for me to know why you didn’t get a letter back, but I do know that in this day and age people find it hard to write letters. It’s very strange, but they don’t like to write.

ME: I gave him my phone number. He can call me, and so on and so forth, because I do have some memories about the family that lived next door to him when he was a little fellow there, the Skidmore family. Mrs. Skidmore’s still living and she and I often talk about Eddie Plank and Isabella, his wife’s name. And I assume she’s not living because she wasn’t in any pictures or anything.

MB: When you talk about Lincoln Avenue, you don’t mean the extension. You mean the old Lincoln Avenue, right?

ME: The old Lincoln Avenue, close to Rutter’s.

MB: Close to Rutters. Right.

ME: Just one house—the very small house, the Hartzell House, and the Plank property.
MB: Did you know Clarence Swinn?

ME: Sure.

MB: He was a character wasn’t he?

ME: Yes.

MB: He was a guide. He was one of the last guides to work out of the square.

ME: Yes, I do remember that.

MB: That wonderful handle-bar mustache.

ME: Oh, yes, he was a tradition there.

MB: He was a tradition, wasn’t he? He ran a little rooming House out of his house.

ME: His wife was quite an unusual person, too. She drove a car for transporting children before there were little school buses, and so on and so forth. She transported them around. She was quite a character.

MB: Yes. I met her. I liked her. They were my landlords when I first moved to Gettysburg.

ME: Were they? You lived in the house across the street there?

MB: No, I lived on Baltimore Street. They owned a property right near the Farnsworth House. I lived on the third floor. Mrs. Swinn...I used to go over to the house and make little conversation with Mrs. Swinn when I paid my rent.

ME: I wanted to tell you that Mrs. Plank, Eddie’s grandmother, knit a cap for my little daughter to wear home from the hospital. She was born prematurely and she weighed only 4 lbs. 6 oz. And her head was just like a little grape-fruit, you know, so I needed something and so she knit it for me and I think I still have it. And I talked to my son just this morning and I told him you were coming to talk with me this morning and he said, ”Well, mother, you ought to look up the Western Union cablegram,” that Eddie Plank sent to you and my dad when your son was born because Eddie sent a telegram saying congratulations to my husband, you know, on the birth of Roger. And there’s something in the telegram about “take care of my mother” when he was out of
MB: Absolutely. Let me ask you this. Your husband had these roots in Gettysburg. You said he worked briefly in New Jersey for Western Union. Did he work for Western Union back in Gettysburg or did he take a different job?

ME: He worked for a short period of time and then he worked a couple jobs, came back to Gettysburg, but he worked for the Keystone Cabinet Company most of the time after we came back. It was a kitchen cabinet business and the family owned the business and he worked in Littlestown. But unfortunately my husband and I were separated before he died and I had the children to raise. We all had a struggle.

MB: But you kept the house?

ME: Uhuh. Yes.

MB: Even though it was the family house.

ME: It was never his home. Yes, it was his home, ours together, but he transferred it to me with a mortgage. He had been given the house from his grandfather when his grandfather died. And unfortunately my husband had a lot of good qualities and was a self-made person and had a good job, but things didn't go right in his life, and finally we had to be separated because I had to keep the family together and his father, of course, was living at that time and living here. His father never owned this property. Everybody in Gettysburg, most of my friends, said, "Weren't you lucky to get the property from Paul's father." But he never owned it. I just don't tell them any differently because I got it directly from the grandfather, you see, and so on and so forth. But at any rate, we had to come to a separation, that I could hold the place together and be a good mother to my children. I was teaching at the time to make ends meet, of course. I had gone back to college. So Roger and Molly and I really worked and I think if you talked to anybody who were our friends, they'd say we worked together and were to be commended for the way we had to struggle to get everyone educated and take care of Granddad Ecker and so on and so forth. And he knew he had a place to live as long as he lived here.

MB: And did he? Did he stay with you?
ME: Yes. He was here until a few months before he died. He was beginning to wander off and I had, we had, to put him in a home.

MB: But when you separated from your husband, you're saying that his father stayed with you?

ME: Oh, absolutely! He knew he could depend on me and he could not depend on his own son. And that was sad. I mean it's putting it very honestly and bluntly. So Paul died in Florida. Roger, our son, was with him when he died.

MB: Was your son...were your son and daughter able to get a college education?

ME: Oh, Roger went to Gettysburg College and then to Dickinson Law School. He's a lawyer. And my daughter went to Millersville and she's a teacher.

MB: OK. That's pretty good. You should feel pretty good about That. You didn't have it easy.

ME: No, that's what I'm saying.

MB: So is your son living in Pennsylvania or does he live...


MB: Near...south of Pittsburgh. And does he have a law practice? Or is he retired?

ME: No, he can't retire. He has three sons--twin sons that are just a year old. He started late in life, too, to be a father.

MB: Wow!

ME: That's what I mean.

MB: He would be in his 40s and 50s now wouldn't he? And he's got twin sons that are a year old.

ME: And an older son seven years old.

MB: Golly, gee! Well, down the line I hope he sends them to Gettysburg College. (Laughter)

ME: He calls me every morning.
MB: Now let me ask you this. You moved to Gettysburg in the late 1930s, sort of the end of the Depression, when things were getting a little bit better, then the war comes. What was your interaction with the downtown? Did you have a regular path to certain stores that you liked to go to downtown? Did you go to Murphy’s or did you go to the grocery store in the downtown? There was one on York Street, I know, and there were probably other ones. Tell me a little bit about your routine.

ME: I didn’t have a lot of time to be uptown, you know, other than grocery shopping and bare necessities, to be honest with you. And I mean I couldn’t go to the movies very much and all this and that. Although I’ve always had a very good group of friends and relatives who stuck by me. And I’ve been active in the church. I transferred my membership here to the Lutheran church where Paul was a member.

MB: Which one was that?

ME: St. James.

MB: St. James.

ME: St. James. And I’ve been active there. Taught Sunday School for 20 some years there and so on and so forth. I’ve been on church council and things like that. And I don’t know, I’ve had lots of outlets and so on and so forth, but now that I’ve been retired for 20 some years, I guess, I’ve been able to pursue some of them a little bit more and so on. But talking about going uptown. The strange thing – one of my few pleasures in life was going shopping – grocery shopping on Saturday and then stopping at Faber’s with Mrs. Skidmore, who used to live next to the Planks, you know. I talked about that they were good friends of ours.

MB: Did you meet her at Faber’s?

ME: We went shopping together. Because for a while we didn’t have a car.

MB: I gotcha.

ME: We didn’t have a car. And then for a while we had one car. This was when Roger was in college, I guess, and Molly was in high school maybe or something. I don’t know. I taught
Head Start before it was a year-round program when it was just a summer program and before there was any kindergarten here in Gettysburg. I taught full-time 9 months, you know, and then I taught Head Start for 6 or 8 weeks in summer school program-reading-and, at that time we had a program for children that needed it and I'm sorry they don't have it anymore because it helped a lot of children keep in touch with reading and math. They had it in both subjects. I taught...that in addition to that I also worked at the gift shop out at the Holiday in the evenings and Roger worked 2 or 3 jobs. He worked as a Park Ranger and then he worked for the highway department on the highway, for one year or so. He had to have transportation to take him wherever they were meeting for their day's work. Roger and Molly taught swimming lessons at pools around in the summertime. And then when Roger was working at jobs in the daytime, at night he worked as a night clerk at a motel in town. Now, if you think we weren't busy! And Molly had another job. She helped me with Head Start, too. So we were going this way and that way as well as keeping together as a family.

MB: Where's your daughter Molly now?

ME: She lives in Lancaster and teaches in Penn Manor. And is waiting to bow out. The governor hasn't put that "30 and out" in for her—she's just finished her 31st year. And she can't take too much more of it. Not a pleasant situation anymore to teach 4th graders.

MB: Really? So she's been teaching 4th grade in Lancaster all these years?

ME: Taught in Lancaster 29 years.

MB: Where does she live in Lancaster? I used to live in Lancaster.

ME: State Street, out close to F & M.

MB: My goodness, I know the street very well. Beautiful street. Very nice. I lived in Lancaster for almost 10 years. I lived about 2 miles north of F & M in a little place called Grandview Heights. I know State Street very well. And a very close friend of mine lives on State Street. I'm just trying to think if there's anything that I haven't asked you that I should have asked you about your Gettysburg
experience. Is there anything you think I should have covered?

ME: Well, I'm busy these days. I've enjoyed my retirement. That you can say. I really am- I have wonderful friends and I do play a lot of bridge. And I have played golf until this year. I haven't been out this year yet. I don't know if I'll get out. I have a wonderful group of friends and co-workers who keep in touch with me and support me!

MB: Do you play bridge with Mrs. Musselman?

ME: Yes. I was at her house last night.

MB: That's a long-running bridge game isn't it?

ME: We played duplicate last night. She needed a substitute. So I was over at her house.

MB: That's nice.

ME: She's a nice person.

MB: Well, I think the important thing is that you stay active, isn't it?

ME: That's the answer. As long as I can do that and keep going here. Now I do realize that I can't do as much as I used to. I did have an operation on my hands—carpal tunnel—both hands this spring and they aren't as strong as they previously were.

MB: You have to do the exercises, I guess.

ME: No, I haven't. I didn't have to do that because I had the bandage on but I still could exercise these all the time I was bandaged. But they're fine but I was having so much trouble I couldn't sleep at night. Now I'm better.

MB: Well, look, most people have more trouble with their legs than their hands.

ME: I have trouble going up and down steps and so on. I get pretty tired. I have to admit it, but I'm not complaining and I have a good doctor.
MB: Wonderful! It sounds like you have a very good Gettysburg life and a very good Adams County life. You've really seen a lot of change in this county and you've been cheerful and done your thing and you really haven't let much grass grow. You've done your thing.

ME: Well, I thank my family and friends for supporting me. You asked about my association uptown. When we were having our hard times everybody realized it and when I needed any material or equipment of any kind, from the builders, they gave me time to pay it. And they were wonderful to me.

MB: That's a small town.

ME: People still are. I just had a big tree cut down close to the house and the house next door is a HUD house now. Are you on the HARB?

MB: No. Norm's on the HARB. [Reference is to her neighbor Norman Forness.]

ME: You're not on the HARB?

MB: No. I'm not on it.

ME: Well, anyhow, I've had problems with this house next door.

MB: Because of the tenants, you mean?

ME: But anyhow, they were digging up the yard again back there to sod it, plant grass seed. The man had to get a tractor in there after my tree was cut down. Of course, it's pretty bumpy out here where the tree was right outside of my house and I just talked to him and I said, "Gee, I ought to have that machine over here sometime!" He said, "I'll come and do it for you." He came right over and just plowed it up for me and so I have beautiful flowers right now. And I said, "Well, how much do I owe you?" He said, "You can't pay me for it." Of course I gave him some money. I mean those are the things that mean a lot to me.

MB: I understand exactly. That's a nice small town thing.

ME: Now, wait a minute. Let's see if there's anything else I wanted to tell you about the Plank family.

MB: OK, you do that.
ME: After Mrs. Plank died, Eddie and Isabella moved out to Colt Park and that’s where they lived before he died. I don’t know when he died exactly, a date. I lost track of it. Neighbors...Well, Mrs. Skidmore’s one son was a babysitter for this Eddie the III. That’s something I thought he should know and remember about. She told me that not long ago. And I don’t know where he worked out of the country...after he was out of the service. That’s why Isabella, his wife, was lonely out in Colt Park for a while. I knew Eddie Plank’s brother—one of his brothers Luther, who owned the mill at Table Rock. Know where that is?

MB: Sure do.

ME: You know the mill? Did you know he owned that?

MB: No. I only knew about Ira.

ME: Well, Ira and Luther, both brothers. So I knew that family very well and they had two boys and two girls in that family and the one daughter used to come to our house quite often. She was very fond of my father. She could talk to him. She’d bring him books and borrow books from him. As I say, I knew the Luther Plank family.

MB: All right. I’ve got to break. I have an 11:00 appointment.