

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Appliances of the Past Project

Effects of Appliances on Life

O. H. 379

HELEN HOOVER

Interviewed

by

Robert Fabian

on

May 2, 1985

HELEN M. HOOVER

Mrs. Helen Hoover was born on February 10, 1915, in Pennsylvania. She was raised in a rural area, and graduated from Connellsville High School. In 1931, Mrs. Hoover attended the University of Pittsburgh. She married Richard S. Hoover in 1933. Mrs. Hoover never held an outside job, and at home she had a housekeeper to assist her with the housework. Mrs. Hoover spends much of her time working in numerous organizations in the community of North Canton, such as: North Canton Public Library, Friends of the North Canton Library, The Little Art Gallery, Friends of the Little Art Gallery, North Canton Beautification Committee, North Canton Community Building YMCA, Hoover Historical Center, Aultman Hospital Women's Board, Canton Garden Club, and Community Christian Church.

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INTERVIEWEE: HELEN HOOVER

INTERVIEWER: Robert Fabian

SUBJECT: Appliance history, Housework in the early 1900's

DATE: May 2, 1985

F: This is Robert Fabian doing an interview for the Oral History Program at Youngstown State University interviewing Helen Hoover.

I'd just like you to give me some background of your family and your life.

H: I'm not a native Ohioan. My home, native home, is in Pennsylvania, southeast of Pittsburgh. It's in the country outside of Connellsville, which is between Uniontown and Greensburg. Most people, when I say Connellsville, immediately think of the McConnellsburg in Pennsylvania, which is near Gettysburg. That's why I did the location between Greensburg and Uniontown.

In my early years I attended a one room schoolhouse for eight grades.

F: What year was this?

H: I was born in 1915, so my first year was in 1921. I was in the first grade. I walked to school, as everyone did, and many of them walked as far as two miles or farther to school. I was fortunate enough, I think, that I attended the elementary school six years. I advanced from second grade to fourth grade and at the end of my seventh grade I was given the examination of the entrance into high school, because my teacher felt that I could pass the exam and enter high school. At that particular time, you didn't advance automatically from elementary to high school, you had to pass the county examination. I was lucky to pass the examination so I entered high school,

which was the Connellsville High School, when I was twelve. There was no bus transportation at that particular time so I walked a mile and a quarter to the train station, and rode a train for forty minutes to Connellsville. Then I walked another mile to the high school. Then I did it in reverse to go home. I was not in school a full day since I lived in the country, but the students who lived in Connellsville were. I did take four or five subjects and I graduated with the number of credits; you needed sixteen at that time. That was the early part of my education before I went to college. What other thoughts would you like me to remember?

F: When did you get married and do you have any children and things like that?

H: I went to the University of Pittsburgh for two years and then I met my future husband. We were married in 1933. So I had been at the university just two years before I married. That was when I came to Ohio.

F: Were you in any clubs?

H: At the university?

F: Yes.

H: I lived at the Kappa Alpha Theta house and my husband had lived at the Alpha Tau Omega house on the same street, only he had lived there two years prior to my living there. He was at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, now Carnegie-Mellon Institute.

In June of 1933 I came to Ohio to live in North Canton. I've lived in this house 51 years. This has been our home, our children's home. Our son was born in 1935 and our daughter was born in 1940. Our son lives in Canton; he is vice-president of the Ohio Power Company and a director of the Hoover Company. Our daughter lives in Hinsdale, Illinois, and is a wife and mother and currently teaches at the learning resource center. She teaches through the eighth, all eight grades in her school in computer science. She had to go to night school just to keep ahead of the students to learn, to keep up on her computer science.

F: Do you belong to any organizations now? What church do you belong to?

H: We are members of the Community Christian Church in North Canton. Over the years our children have been

there and were members and attended Sunday school and the church activities.

My first volunteer job or experience here in North Canton was with the Canton Community Fund. I volunteered on the Philanthropic Committee of the North Canton Women's Club. Later on, in the early years, I became a member of the Canton Junior Service, which later became affiliated with Canton Junior League.

F: What kind of work did they do?

H: It was a volunteer service organization to the community. We did hospital work, we developed and acted in children's plays and we trooped to the city schools in Canton.

F: So you've had a lot of time to get out of the home and everything and belong to some of these organizations?

H: Yes. I was a member of the Girl Scout Board for nine years.

F: Very active time! How did you find time for all of this?

H: I've been a professional volunteer. (Laughter) And I continue to be a volunteer.

F: Do you find you enjoy having this outside work to do?

H: Yes.

F: Does that bring you up to date?

H: My prime interest in the North Canton area has been the North Canton Library where I was trustee for 31 years. I was chairman of the Little Art Gallery Board for many years. I've been a member of the North Canton Community Building YMCA and an honorary member of the board. I've been active in the North Canton Beautification Committee. Of course, I'm still active in all of the North Canton activities and those organizations. I'm a member of the Women's Board at Aultman Hospital.

F: This is amazing.

H: My life has been interesting and busy with outside activities.

F: I hope you can give me some indoor activities. Okay, let's get a little bit to some questions I have, some-

thing about housework. Do you think a lot of the appliances, say for instance, do you remember some of the old stoves or doing the laundry? Do you think a lot of these appliances helped women ease their workload?

H: Definitely.

F: In what way?

H: Well, laundry used to be a very different way than it is now. I still have a copper washboard that we used to wash socks with by hand, anything that needed extra for soil removal, which is very different from our automatic washing machines today that we put everything in.

F: Can you kind of describe for me the first washer you used? What was it like? How much work did it really take?

H: It wasn't an automatic ringer, for instance, the first washing machine I had. It had an agitator, which of course washed the clothes, but you had to take them out by hand and put them through a ringer. There wasn't a gas dryer so we hung them on the clothes line to dry. Yes, I would say that modern appliances are definitely an improvement.

F: Do you think that even though with the invention of a better washing machine that it eased your workload? I've read sources that say because of new inventions women were doing more laundry. What do you think about that? People would change their clothes more often and there would be more laundry to do.

H: That could be, but you can load a load of laundry and be doing something else while that is washing. You take it out of the washer and put it into the dryer and while it's drying you haven't had to bring it up from the basement like most of us did in those earlier years and hang it on the line and then take it down when it was dry. You're doing something else; you can be using the vacuum cleaner.

F: I was going to say, it made time for doing other work then?

H: Right.

F: Did anyone help you doing the laundry?

H: Yes, I was very fortunate in having household help. In fact, they did most of it.

F: Did you kind of supervise or lend a hand?

H: Absolutely.

F: Well, then it was like the two of you. What was your first refrigerator like?

H: The thing about it that was so different from today was that it was not self-defrosting, so that was a major thing. You had to take everything out of the refrigerator and empty the ice trays and turn off the cooling system and defrost it. It really was a half day's process.

F: It's like an inventory of what kind of food you had.

H: Yes.

F: Did the development of the new refrigerators that self-defrost and everything or the new methods of storing foods, did it change the kind of foods that you had all of the time?

H: Yes. My first refrigerator did not have a freezing compartment for storing frozen foods.

F: What did you have to do?

H: Many things were processed; they were either canned or dehydrated. Today, it's so much easier to freeze foods and vegetables and store them in a freezer.

F: Did you do any of the canning?

H: Yes, lots of it.

F: What kinds of things did you can?

H: All the vegetables in the garden. Particularly during World War II, everyone had a victory garden. Everyone grew potatoes and corn and beans and peas and carrots and beets, all of those things.

F: So this was mostly canned and it was self-sufficient?

H: That's right.

- F: So with the new refrigerators you were able to store more foods. Did you have more varieties?
- H: More variety than we had frozen and also, I think the quality is better because it retained more vitamins in frozen foods.
- F: I see. That's another plus then too.
- H: It's a plus.
- F: Can you describe the first stove that you had?
- H: Yes, it was a gas stove with one oven. It was not a flat top across; the top of the oven was higher than the gas burner. It was very efficient. Cooking was fine. And the oven, so far as baking was concerned, was very satisfactory.
- F: What do you have now, is it electric?
- H: It's electric.
- F: How come you went from gas to electric? Is it easier to operate?
- H: It's clean. I think when we remodeled our kitchen some twenty years ago we simply went all electric with all of the appliances. They were all from one manufacturer.
- F: So it was a convenience then to go to electric?
- H: Yes, and from the service angle, being all one manufacturer, one company was responsible for the service for all of the appliances.
- F: When you had the gas stove was it easy to operate compared to what you have now?
- H: Oh yes, it was easy.
- F: Just as easy as today?
- H: Of course. The oven didn't have an automatic pilot, but today there is an automatic pilot so they light just as easy.
- F: Was cooking just as easy, compared from gas to that?
- H: Yes, I think so. There is a difference in the cooking



in that with electricity, you have to turn the electric off before the cooking period is over because the heat is still in the burner and it continues to cook.

F: Was this different then, in a gas stove?

H: Yes, in gas it's different because the heat is automatically off when you turn it off.

F: I see. Is there a difference in the taste of foods, do you think?

H: No.

F: Do you think having this type of stove, gas and then electric, does it save you any time, or is it just about the same?

H: No, I think they're about the same.

F: How was it when you were younger and you had to help your mother clean the rugs, what was it like?

H: Very early you put them over a line outside and you beat them with a carpet beater.

F: It must have been a lot of work?

H: Oh sure, because it was heavy. Moving the carpet in itself was a big job.

F: Moving the furniture.

H: That's right.

F: When did you get your first type of vacuum and what was that like?

H: Are you referring to my childhood?

F: Well, your childhood and then you can bring me up-to-date.

H: I would think, maybe, we had our first one when I was about six or seven.

F: Was it a manual one?

H: No, it was electric.

F: It wasn't a central vacuum cleaner?

H: No. It was a hand push. I don't recall, though, that it had the beater bar and brush. I think it was more just straight suction, although it was not like a tank type vacuum cleaner.

F: Did it have a lot of attachments that you could use with it?

H: Oh yes.

F: The same variety as you would almost have today?

H: Yes.

F: I don't have to ask you the ultimate, did it ease your work at all? (Laughter)

H: Oh yes, it did.

F: What kind do you use now?

H: I use the Hoover Concept II downstairs; I think it's Hoover Concept I upstairs, and we also have a Hoover Constellation. The tank, one for the stairs, and so on. We use them for many different things, including the workshop.

F: Is it faster with the new types?

H: Oh, the Concept II is marvelous. It's no effort whatsoever.

F: The thing is that you still have to be there to operate it?

H: Yes, you have to be there to use it. But one of these years I think . . .

F: When new products first came out on the market, let's say when you first got married, were you able to buy them when they first came out? What motivated you to buy these appliances, was it the advertisement that they were going to ease your workload? What was in your buying?

H: For instance, buying a toaster was much easier, not the kind that you put the toast in the top and push it down, but you put it in the sides and then the flaps come up, connect, and toast it, which was certainly a lot easier

than toasting it over a gas flame or an electric burner.

F: Because it would burn?

H: Yes. Or in the oven. I think it was just one of those things that was available and it was practical so we bought it.

F: Did you buy a lot of appliances because they were practical?

H: Sure, like a mixer; it was very practical. It would save time; it was faster; it was easier to bake a cake mixing it with an electric mixer than it was to hand beat it.

F: How about a microwave oven, do you have one of those?

H: Oh, I think they're marvelous.

F: That has to be the newest invention in the kitchen right now, wouldn't you say?

H: I think so.

F: It saves time for you?

H: Oh yes, it saves time and it also saves food.

F: Why is that?

H: Leftovers can be heated in a microwave and they don't lose the flavor like other types of heating, which is one of the best reasons. In a microwave also, I can prepare maybe eight servings at one time and freeze it and then heat it in the microwave and the freshness and the flavor is just as good as when it was made originally.

F: So it is a convenience then to the family and it saves you time. Do you have a dishwasher?

H: Yes.

F: When did you buy that, when it first came out on the market?

H: I would think that it must have been one of the very early ones on the market because it was loaded from the top. It would have been in the 1940's, which I think

would be about the time of the first dishwasher.

F: So it was in the 1940's, in that period?

H: Either the late 1930's or early 1940's. I'm just talking off the top of my head of this; I can check it out, but that's the way I remember.

F: Do you think they really helped you, easing doing the dishes? Maybe you just had to do them once a day then, is that how it helped?

H: Of course it helped. It was wonderful for a large family. Now that there are just the two of us, I can put in a whole day's dishes and just wash them once, so there's a saving in water and dishwashing liquid.

F: Even though you have to rinse off the dishes and everything before you put them into the dishwasher? You think it eases the workload, so it's timesaving for you?

H: Yes.

F: This is a general question. How do you feel about housework? Do you take pride in the cleanliness of your home? It's evident that you do because you have such a beautiful home.

H: I think cleanliness is very, very important and taking care of one's possessions in the home. Just as well, I think a clean kitchen is important to one's health and the family's health. I don't mind housework at all. Many of my friends, if they had a choice, would rather cook.

F: You don't find it drudgery?

H: No.

F: You enjoy doing housework and cleaning things?

H: Yes, because it's like canning, you can stand back and see what you've done. Your work really shows. It's as creative as cooking. Cooking is very creative, I think.

F: So you find pleasure in doing things, cleaning and cooking, maybe even doing the laundry?

H: That's right.

F: Compared to when you were helping your mother do her

housework, do you feel housework is easier now or is it still demanding?

H: It's much easier, but it's still there to be done.

F: So it's never going to go away?

H: No, I don't think so.

F: How is it easier, the appliances?

H: Absolutely, with all the appliances that are available. I think fabrics and wallpaper, finishes on furniture, everything. There are newer materials, new fabrics, more ways of doing things and therefore cleaning is easier.

F: So you feel you've had it better than your mother did?

H: Oh sure. With Scotchgard furniture it's easier to clean. There are many ways.

F: Can you describe what was a typical workday helping your mother, and what was it like?

H: Everything was really hand done in my youth. If you baked a cake you started from the very beginning of the recipe; you didn't buy a box at the grocery store where the mix was all ready for you and all you did was maybe add a cup of milk or an egg. I think that applies to most everything. It's much easier today to cook and to bake and to clean all those things because of all of the new things, the new equipment that we have.

F: Did your mother maybe do the laundry on Mondays and Tuesday clean the house? How is that now, do you have that kind of organization day to day, or is it more that you can do a lot of things in one day?

H: Of course, I live in that era because I grew up in that era. So yes, Monday is laundry and Tuesday is the ironing day; Thursday is a day for cooking or baking, and Friday for cleaning. Now it is very different with the children and grandchildren. I don't think they have a laundry day. With the automatic washer they can wash a load any time a load is ready. With the fabrics today we don't iron as many things as we used to. Many things are wash and wear; you simply take them out and shake them, fold them up and they're ready to go.

F: So for your daughter it's more as if she can do this

all in one day or a couple days. Rather you spread it out as your mother did.

H: Yes.

F: Do you think that the new appliances in the kitchen cause you to spend more time in the kitchen? You were telling me a new stove, or mixer, or a blender, you can make more and more varieties of desserts or something. Did you spend more time in the kitchen?

H: No, I don't spend more time in the kitchen. Another thing, our diets have changed over the years. We eat many more fresh fruits and vegetables and fewer desserts. In fact, we barely have dessert and such things like pie and cake; my husband will have maybe custard or chocolate pudding, something like that, and I eat fruit. From that standpoint, I think nutrition makes a big difference in the amount of time spent in the kitchen.

F: Do you think right now if you went back and if somebody would take away a lot of these appliances in the kitchen, say just like the microwave or a blender or a vacuum cleaner, could you do this housework just as well, do you think?

H: No, I couldn't.

F: You're very dependent?

H: That's right.

F: I'm surprised.

H: I wouldn't be able to take care of a carpet like this if I didn't have a vacuum cleaner. What would I use, a broom? I can't take it up and put it over a line and beat it. From that standpoint it would be very difficult. I wouldn't have dusting tools to clean furniture or draperies.

F: What about laundry, would you be able to do the laundry?

H: I wouldn't like to.

F: I see.

H: I wouldn't like to go back.

F: But you probably could.

- H: Oh yes, I could, but I wouldn't like to. (Laughter)
- F: After talking for awhile now, do you think that these appliances ultimately helped women leave the home and maybe go and do outside work in social circles?
- H: Yes, I think it made it easier for women to be more active community wise. Today, many women have a job outside of the home, and I think this is one of the reasons.
- F: Do you feel that advertisers and manufacturers make appliances to help women, or do you think they're motivated for their profits? Do you think that a lot of these appliances could be even easier?
- H: I think they ought to make it easier for the customer. Whatever is a timesaver for the customer, that's the appliance she's going to want to have in her home.
- F: That's true. That will enable her to do other things then?
- H: That's right. It could give her more time to spend with her family, with her children, her husband. It doesn't necessarily have to be outside of the home.
- F: You said back a little bit ago that you had a house servant. How long did you have her?
- H: I've always had someone to help.
- F: Do you find her doing the work easier for you?
- H: Yes, it naturally has given me more time to serve in the community. Very often we worked together, but there's no doubt about it that I did have more time.
- F: You would be almost right next to her then because you do take care in how the finished product is?
- H: Oh yes.
- F: Is there anything else that you would like to add that you would think important that I might not have questioned you on about appliances in the home, and easing your work load?
- H: Well, I'm waiting for the day when there is going to be a vacuum cleaner that will propel itself to a chair and

clean it automatically with dusting tools; those robots are coming.

F: Do you think they'll ever come?

H: Yes, I do. It's such a changing world and there are so many new innovations that I think it is a good possibility.

F: You've lived the type of period that there have been such innovations. What do you think is the most innovative and helpful house aid? If you had to narrow it down to one, which would it be?

H: I almost think in the kitchen it's the garbage disposal. (Laughter) If I had to choose between the dishwasher and the garbage disposal that would be my choice.

F: I wasn't even thinking of that. I don't have any other questions, so that will be it.

END OF INTERVIEW