

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

The Rayen School Project

Student Experience

O. H. 24

MRS. HELEN BRENNER

Interviewed

by

Mark Connelly

on

October 30, 1974

## HELEN BRENNER

Helen Brenner was born on July 24, 1898 in Youngstown, Ohio. Her parents were Harry D. and Nellie Evans Thompson and she was the oldest of three children. She started at the Rayen High School in 1910 and was a member of the 1914 graduating class. It is these years at Youngstown's first high school which she speaks of in her interview.

Following her years at Rayen, Mrs. Brenner attended Lake Erie College from 1914 to 1916 and then went to Mount Holyoke College, where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1918. She taught German and French in the Charleroi (Pennsylvania) School System from 1918 to 1919 and in the Warren (Ohio) system from 1919 to 1921.

In 1921, Mrs. Brenner married Paul Brenner, who is now deceased. She has two children, Paul T. and Margaret Louise Brenner and currently resides at 5288 Old Oxford Lane in Youngstown. She is a member of the YWCA, Florence Crittendon Home, Symphony Guild, and literary clubs. Her special interests include traveling and her grandchildren.

DONNA DEBLASIO  
June 30, 1977

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INTERVIEWEE: MRS. HELEN BRENNER  
INTERVIEWER: Mark Connelly  
SUBJECT: Student Experience  
DATE: October 30, 1974

C: This is an interview with Mrs. Helen Brenner for the Youngstown State University Oral History project concerning the Rayen School. It's being done by Mark Connelly at Mrs. Brenner's residence. It is October 30, 1974. It's approximately 11:00 a.m.

C: Mrs. Brenner, would you please talk a little bit about your family background?

B: I was born in Youngstown. The mere fact that you're interviewing me about old Rayen shows that I'm very much an elder citizen. It has been fun for me to think about old Rayen. Things are so different now than they were then. You see, I began going to Rayen School in 1910 when it was the only high school in Youngstown. It was not yet under the Board of Education. It was an endowed school, as you know from your research on it.

We lived in the golden age before World War I. As I look back on it, I certainly count my blessings. I don't think today's young students have the happy, carefree experience that we did in our generation.

I was the oldest of three children. I was preparing for college. My mother had been a teacher and a school principal, so she was very helpful.

C: Where was this at?

B: Here in Youngstown. My entire background is in Youngstown. One of the outstanding things that we young people got from Rayen School in those days was dedication from

the teachers. They were exceedingly high calibre, devoted people and their names, I think, are well known today. People still talk about Sara Jane Peterson, Fraulein Kerwer, Lida Baldwin, Miriam Thomas, Florence Tuckerman, Katherine Smith, Hayes Rogers, A. L. Button and George Chatterton, who later became principal of South High.

Rayen was very crowded when I entered as a freshman because South High had not been built yet. We went to school for half a day and it meant that we had very concentrated study, but it was fun.

Later on, after South High opened, we went full time. I lived about a mile, or a mile and a half from school and I walked home for lunch. There was no bussing from school and I walked home for lunch. There was no bussing problem in those days. Everybody walked or rode streetcars. There were no busses. When the YWCA was built next door to the old Rayen campus, we used to go over there for lunch. We could get mashed potatoes and gravy for three cents and it tasted pretty good. (Laughter) I always said the gravy was better there than it was at home.

One of the things I remember about Rayen is sitting on the front steps. Probably now you'd call them senior steps because the senior girls sat on them. This was before Women's Lib. The boys were still very polite to the girls and they stood while the girls sat. We joked and chattered. We did not sit on those steps until we were seniors. Until the bell rang for classes to start, we were always out there.

C: What sort of things did you talk about on the steps?

B: Well, I'm afraid they weren't the deep questions that young people get into today. We talked largely about parties, and picnics. Once in a while, we exchanged notes about our subjects to help each other out. We weren't a heavy, pessimistic group as I see today's young people. That hadn't occurred yet. The disillusionment seems to have come with the world events since then. We were very carefree and very happy.

C: What sort of problems did you have?

B: You know, I didn't have any. I truly didn't have any problems.

C: Did your friends ever come to you with problems?

B: Well, I don't believe so. Most of my friends didn't have any particular problems. We were not destructive of property in those days in the same way that young ones are today. At the same time, we did things that I suppose the Rayen trustees thought were a bit destructive. The Senior boys always climbed up on the roof before games in the fall, to put their initials on the cupola dome.

In the main study hall, which was also the library, there were statues of famous authors and musicians and so forth. Those statues usually got decorated by the students with mustaches and collars and ties.

One year some students put alarm clocks up in the ceiling and they went off at all times of the day. You would have had to tear the building down to find them all. That was very annoying to Mr. Griswold.

Another awful thing we did was to open the radiator valves and put limburger cheese in them over the weekend. Then when the heat was turned on on Monday morning, we got a day off from school. I think those were the most awful things we did and none of them were destructive of property like the things young ones do nowadays.

C: How did you get along with your faculty? Did you feel they were excellent teachers? Did you get along with them on a personal level?

B: We weren't as personal with them as students are today. We were on very good terms with them though. There was a wall between us in that they were much older and very wise. They were very helpful, but it was usually just a faculty-student relationship.

They taught us a great deal. For instance during my freshman year, Mr. Button was my history teacher. I don't know how much I learned of ancient history, but I will never forget that he taught me how to outline. We had to outline our entire book for the first term. Every blessed day we outlined. To this day, it has been a great help, because when I listen to lectures, I can follow the salient points, and classify them in my own mind under a capital "A" or a small "a".

C: What other methods of teaching did you find at the school?

B: We hadn't heard of audio-visual aids in those days. (Laughter) There weren't such things as tape recorders.

The teacher used more of a lecture system than anything else. We had to do a great deal of memorization in classes such as Latin, French and German. We also memorized lots of English literature, which we have never forgotten.

C: What was your favorite subject in school?

B: Well, I taught German and French, so I guess that languages in general were my favorite subjects.

C: Where did you teach German and French?

B: In Warren, Ohio

C: At Warren Harding High School?

B: Oh, no. There wasn't a Warren Harding in those days. (Laughter) There was one high school then, which I think has been torn down. I'm not sure. You see, I graduated from Mount Holyoke in 1918 and I was married in 1921, all of which dates before the new high schools in Warren.

I was to have taught at Rayen the next year, however, in those days, married women did not teach.

C: Was that a law or was it just an unwritten rule?

B: I think it was definitely a rule. Of course, by that time, Rayen was under control of the Board of Education entirely. There was a shortage of jobs for men so maybe it was good that women were home after they were married, and taking care of their families.

C: Would you consider the discipline at school to have been tough?

B: The teachers expected good discipline. We came from homes where discipline was expected and when we got to school, there was no great discipline problem. Anyone who broke a rule was very forcefully dealt with by being called to the office. That was all you needed.

C: What happened then?

B: We were just talked to and reprimanded and we felt very ashamed.

C: You said you came from homes where discipline was expected.

B: Right.

C: How would you categorize your family's socio-economic position in the community?

B: I suppose it was middle class.

C: Would this be true of most of the students going to Rayen at this time?

B: It was a cross-section. Probably most of the people who went to Rayen were preparing for college. You didn't have to go to school after you were sixteen. I think that was the breaking point in those days. Young people very often went to work at sixteen.

C: You say you went to school for half a day while it was the only high school. Did many of the students have jobs after school for the rest of the day?

B: I don't think so. They had to study because you see, we had no study time when we were going to school. We crowded in all of the classes. We went to school early and continued from class to class until our half day was up. Then the other class was moved in. I don't know how the teachers did it.

C: About how much time a day did you study when you were going to school?

B: The teachers felt that they had a right to ask for an hour and a half preparation for each subject.

C: Did you generally study for an hour and a half then?

B: Well, I think our families--at least the families that I knew--saw to it that we did study as soon as the dinner chores were over until about ten o'clock at night. There was no radio and no television, so there weren't many interruptions that competed for your time.

C: Did many students fail at the Rayen School that you knew of or was it rare to fail?

B: I would say it was rare. Some students failed, but it was rare. If you ever got a "P" for "poor" on your report card, you shuttered. If you got another one, you would probably fail the course.

C: You say there was no TV, or radio. What sort of extra-curricular activities did you have at the Rayen School?

- B: Do you mean what did we do after school hours?
- C: Yes. What did you do after school, or on week ends? What were your special activities? What did you do for fun?
- B: We went to movies, and picnics. We played tennis, at public tennis courts which were new then. We had YWCA and YMCA gym classes. We went swimming. I suppose we were a pretty dull lot, but I think a very happy lot, too.
- C: What activities did the school sponsor?
- B: They sponsored athletics. There was an exceedingly keen rivalry between Rayen and South, when they were the only two schools. We played our games over at the West end of Madison Avenue in a place called Wright Field. There weren't stadiums. We had day-time games. We didn't have to pay for the stadium so we didn't have to worry about having enough money.
- C: Would you say the school really got behind and backed these activities?
- B: Oh, they backed them strongly. We had huge football rallies and big bonfires out on the campus. We had parades. We had great times.
- C: Were there any special rules of conduct for a girl attending extracurricular functions. What was expected of you, as a Rayen student?
- B: I don't think anything was expected of us as Rayen students. As girls our deportment and the way we dressed was very carefully outlined for us. I don't even think there were rules. We were just told what young ladies should do and we did it.
- C: What were you told?
- B: Well now, for instance, we were just beginning to have such wicked things as rouge and lipstick for young girls. When we went to the washrooms during our recess period, Mrs. Sara Jane Peterson, who was one of the people who has gone down in fame, would stand there looking very stern. If a girl would stand in front of a mirror too long, she would be scornfully told to get upstairs. It was that sort of thing.
- C: Everybody talks about Mrs. Peterson. What was your opinion of her?



B: She was exceedingly brilliant. She could be exceedingly cruel. She was an excellent teacher. I personally had no difficulty with her at all. One of her favorite quotes was "You have all the time there is, you have twenty-four hours a day and no one has more than that."

There was a girl in my class who was very poor. She managed the house for her father and herself. She also had a job from seven o'clock in the morning until she went to school. She worked at night after school, too. Sometimes she did not have all of her homework done and Mrs. Peterson would say that to her and I would just weep inside. That girl would once in a while faint in school from utter fatigue and yet, according to Mrs. Peterson, "You have twenty-four hours a day."

If students would make mistakes at the blackboard she would make them feel exceedingly uncomfortable. Now, to my mind, those things aren't justified.

C: Did many teachers at the Rayen School try to follow her example?

B: No, no. Miss Baldwin, who taught right across the hall from her, was another of the very oldtimers. While she was exceedingly strict, she was also kinder than Sara Jane Peterson.

Miss Kerwer, the German teacher, was pretty bad sometimes. She would tell us to /German expression/ "stehen-sie gerade wie ein deutscher soldat." Then, when World War I came along, we were sure she was going to lead the parade of Germans down Federal Street should the Germans win. But we made her say /German expression/ "wie ein Amerikanischer soldat!"

Miss Kerwer was lots of fun. She was old when she taught me. She had taught school when my mother was teaching. All year long she wore overshoes to save her shoes. I remember she was asked to speak at one of our football rallies and she said that she was going to the "feetball" game to be a "rooster" like the rest of us. She never, in spite of all of her years here, was too proficient in speaking "American" as we know it.

C: You made reference to dress. What was the typical dress in those days?

B: I don't know how to describe it. Certainly we did not wear blue jeans. The girls' skirts, in my time, were long; they were ankle length. We dressed the way a

well-dressed person would dress for church or afternoons. We were carefully dressed. We were not casually dressed.

The boys wore collars and ties. The nearest that we came to having a problem with hair happened while I was there. Some of the boys thought it would be lots of fun to shave their heads in peculiar fashions. Some of them shaved all of their hair off except for a fringe around the edge. Some shaved their heads like monks with a small circle shaved off on top. Others shaved their heads like Indians with a hunk of hair left in the middle. Of course, there was lots of laughing and giggling with the result that all of the boys were told to go home and stay there until their hair grew out. That was their punishment. They weren't allowed to stay and divert anybody's attention.

C: About how many boys had to go home?

B: Oh, there were ten or twelve. They were very popular boys, and full of pep and zip. (laughter) They certainly were queer looking.

C: Another thing interested me. You said that there was one girl at school who was poor. Did your family have trouble paying the tuition for you to go to Rayen?

B: There was no tuition. No. Of course, we had to buy all of our own books and all of our own supplies. There was no tuition, though.

C: You said the boys wore collars and ties and the girls were usually properly dressed. Do you think that the dress code ever hindered certain people from going to school? Was there anyone who couldn't afford the clothing?

B: No. No, I don't think so. They could always be neat and clean.

C: What sort of books did you read while you were in the Rayen School? What kinds of books were given to you to read?

B: Do you mean in class?

C: Well, what kind did you read in class or which ones were recommended to you by the teachers.

B: Well, I think most of the books which we read were classics. Our education definitely had a classical

flavor. For instance, during the whole year in junior English we read just Shakespeare. We read a great deal of Dickens, too. I don't think we read any current novels as such. We would discuss newspaper and magazine articles but the magazines were totally different than today's magazines.

C: In what way?

B: Did you ever hear of The Literary Digest or Muncie's? The Atlantic Monthly, of course is still in existence. We read Harper's and Scribner's. That's as near as we got to reading any contemporary literature. We read articles in those magazines and discussed them.

C: Did Rayen School at that time have any new facilities that other schools did not have? Did you have any educational equipment, as we know it?

B: Well, during my freshman year, the wing on Rayen School was built. It is now part of the Board of Education. Before that, it was just the old Rayen building facing Wick Avenue. The new wing meant that for the first time, we had domestic science classes for the girls and shop classes for the boys. We had our first gymnasium. There had been no gym until that time. We had a class in art and jewelry making taught by Miss Belle Pyle, and that class was very popular. I really think that was all, though.

C: Could you describe a typical day in the life of a Rayen student in 1914? What was a typical day for you?

B: That's the year I graduated. It would probably seem very dull to you because it was mostly a combination of going to our classes and interspersing our classes with study hall. We visited with friends in the corridors as we went from one class to another.

In study hall, we wrote notes to people we were especially fond of and we used a dictionary for our post office. The dictionaries were on shelves along the walls of the study halls. We'd give the signal to the boy or girl of our special interest and they would know that they had to go up and look under their initial, and find their latest letter. Oh I tell you, when you consider the difference, there certainly is a generation gap.

At noon, many of us would sit together and eat our lunches out of our sacks.

C: Did you have a cafeteria?

B: No, no, there was no cafeteria. There was no cafeteria ever in that Rayen school.

C: Where did you usually eat?

B: We ate at our desks. I ate in Mrs. Peterson's room, (laughter) which we always cleaned up very carefully, believe me!

C: Did you feel comfortable eating in there?

B: Oh, yes. Sometimes we played hooky, went down to the old Dome Theater and spent a whole nickel to go to a movie. At other times we would go down to the Park Theater, which in those days had vaudeville. When we got out, there was Mr. Herr, the assistant principal, with a large tablet and a pencil. He said nothing and just wrote down our names as we passed. He knew us all. The next day we received a notice to report to his office, where we were reprimanded and had to stay after school to do a little studying on a special subject as a punishment.

C: If you were caught once, would you try it again?

B: I'm afraid we didn't because our parents were notified! About the worst thing we did was to go downtown. There was no Wick Avenue Bridge then and we had to wait for trains to get by on the Erie tracks. When we were in a great hurry, we went through a moving train, which I imagine was quite dangerous.

C: You always hear of various cliques in a school. Did you have any cliques at the Rayen School and what were they based on? Did certain people associate with certain groups?

B: Well, students associated with their good friends. There used to be a tendency to have little clubs. I was in a little club. There were twelve girls and naturally, we would gravitate together, eat our lunches together, and visit each other a lot.

There weren't cliques in the sense that we ostracized other people. It was entirely a democratic society, if that's what you mean. Rayen School, being the only high school in Youngstown and then afterwards being the only North Side high school for a long time, had all sorts of people there. We were always very, very good friends.

C: Was Mr. Griswold the principal?

- B: Mr. Griswold was the principal at first and then Mr. Miller, who had been Mr. Griswold's assistant, became principal.
- C: What was your opinion of these two men?
- B: I had the highest opinion of them. They were wonderful people really and they set good examples. They expected a lot from us and we felt we were letting them down if we didn't produce. They were very proud of us when we did produce. Since the schools were so much smaller, there was a personal relationship and they very often knew not only you as an individual, but they knew your parents also.
- C: Did you ever talk to the principals on a personal level?
- B: I couldn't imagine talking to either of them on a personal level. (laughter)
- C: Were you aware of any of the members of the board of trustees? Did you know any of them by name or did you know them by sight?
- B: Yes.
- C: Who were some of these men?
- B: Well, Mr. Robert McCurdy was one, and later there was Mr. Robert Bentley. They were largely people of means as well as education, who carried on Mr. Rayen's dream that there should be something beyond just the lower grades for the Youngstown young people.
- C: Did the members of the board of trustees take an active role in the school?
- B: They were exceedingly aware of everything that was going on. They set the standards for the school and they presented our diplomas at commencement. I imagine that it was with a great deal of trepidation that they relinquished their reins entirely. For a long time, the financial situation was controlled by the trustees and the Board of Education of Youngstown who used tax money as the expenses increased.
- C: How did you feel about the trustees relinquishing their so-called power over the Rayen School?
- B: Well, it was one of those things that had to happen eventually. We who were concerned with the school, didn't notice any difference. For instance, my younger

brother and sister graduated not from The Rayen School but from Rayen High School and it was all an in-going thing really.

C: What have your classmates done since they graduated from Rayen School that you know of. What are their accomplishments or failures?

B: Have you interviewed Pat Kennedy yet?

C: Not yet, no.

B: Well, Pat was president of our class and he has just organized our sixtieth reunion, contacting all the people that are still left.

We have had a good many doctors, lawyers, and judges. Most of the girls in the class, I think, became teachers or married. There weren't outstanding careers for girls then. You should ask Pat about individuals; that will be something that he can fill in better than I.

C: I was interested in knowing what really stands out the most in your mind about Rayen School?

B: The faculty stands out most in my mind.

C: Can you recall back to your graduation day? How did you feel on that day?

B: I felt exceedingly old and exceedingly experienced. I don't think I ever felt older than I did when I graduated from Rayen School. I was only fifteen, but I felt exceedingly old, because I had been able to encompass those four years.

C: You graduated at fifteen? Was that the usual age of graduation?

B: No. I think part of it was because I was the first child in the family and my mother had her teaching experience and helped me. I guess the Lord was good and gave me a fair brain. That's why, when you asked me if I had problems with my teachers, I said that I didn't.

C: That's interesting. How did you get along with your classmates, who were seventeen or eighteen?

B: My only difficulty was a social one because my parents didn't think any girl should date until she was sixteen.

They finally had to relent and let me step out a bit my senior year at fifteen. (laughter) Sixteen was considered quite the proper age for dating to begin.

C: Did Mrs. Peterson ever have an opinion on that?

B: I don't think I ever heard her express an opinion on that.

My dating began with the boy that I eventually married in 1921. He was the editor of the Rayen Record and was on the baseball team.

There were many romances in our class. I think maybe five or six couples married eventually.

Another thing our generation believed in was marrying when you were through your education and the man could support his wife.

C: Did the school ever take an active role in overseeing who was dating who and things like that?

B: No. Our school parties were very carefully chaperoned, but that was the extent of it. Of course, when they expected so much homework from us, it wasn't the pattern to date except on weekends.

C: An interesting point that I would like to discuss is that when you started, you were just going for a half a day and when you finished school, you were going for a full day.

B: Yes. You see, South High opened later on in our freshman year, so we only had really one full semester of half days.

C: Did you like it better going just a half a day?

B: Oh no. It was much more relaxing to go the whole day.

C: This is a general question. What did you get from the Rayen School, that you couldn't have gotten from any other school?

B: I know I got intellectual discipline, which is very important. You don't tackle subjects casually when you have an excellent teacher who expects you to do things more in-depth. It takes a lot of discipline to do your best when you're going to school and still have fun on the side.

- C: If you hear the name "The Rayen School," do you get any sort of special feeling or does something come across your mind?
- B: Oh indeed. It's definitely a part of my life. It's a very important part of my life. It was my young girlhood and it was an exceedingly pleasant four years in every way.
- C: Do you like to make a distinction between the Rayen School and the Rayen High School now?
- B: Well, I don't think about it really because my distinction is between school in general in my day and school now. There is both the difference in the teachers and the teachers' attitude. Today teachers listen to their unions and so forth instead of being purely dedicated, such as the teachers we had had. Also, the students' attitude toward school has changed.
- C: You can elaborate on that if you want.
- B: Well, maybe I'm speaking on something that you could tell me more about. It seems to me that so many students nowadays are content with not doing their best in school, but with just getting by. They seem to have lost an idealism which our generation was blessed with.
- Maybe World War I did destroy a lot of idealism for people, but my generation had it. We were idealists. This was a good world and we were glad to be in it. When I think of school, I feel so sorry for the present-day kids whose life seems to me drab. They're serious and troubled about so many different things and they're just missing so much that our generation had.
- C: You spoke about dedication of the student. Did you notice any lessening in dedication as you went through school or was it at the same level all that time?
- B: You see, my school days all took place in the golden age. I graduated from college in 1918 in the midst of World War I.
- C: Well, did you notice any change in students?
- B: I certainly notice it in my children and now in my grandchildren. My daughter is a teacher and so I hear a lot about students from her. She can't even recall the names of some of her teachers. Teachers, in my generation, were so important that they were treasures in our lives always.



- C: You can still recall every teacher you had?
- B: I can recall all of them, yes.
- C: Who was your favorite?
- B: I don't know that I had one. I really don't.
- C: Which teacher would come into your mind first when you think of the Rayen School?
- B: Mrs. Sara Jane Peterson. (laughter)
- C: Is there anything else you'd like to comment on, about the school and your memories of it?
- B: Well, I'm afraid I've been superficial in recalling what I've been saying. Much of the change that has taken place is in keeping with the time. I'm just very, very grateful for the time that I spent at Rayen. I know that these changes that came about had to take place because of the changing of our society. I'm sorry that so many of the standards had to be lowered.
- C: Was the student body at the Rayen School a very closely knit student body?
- B: Oh very. Very.
- C: What do you attribute that to?
- B: The marvelous Rayen School spirit. We had alumnus songs and class songs, and many rallies. But, of course, we were a small group by today's standards.
- C: Was there a wide variety of ethnic groups attending school? For example, were there many Italians, Irishmen, or Jewish people?
- B: Would you believe that we didn't think of them as ethnic groups?
- C: There was no distinctions made between groups?
- B: No.
- C: Was there an awareness of economic conditions of certain families?
- B: No. (laughter) Now that I think of it, of course, some of the big football stars were black. For instance, you

would recall Clarence Robinson because he's just left the scene. His leadership has kept us out of very critical racial problems here in town. He was one of the football stars in our day, and was very popular.

C: Was he a respected figure in the school?

B: Oh very much so. Very much so. He was a class officer. We had a good many athletes who were black and we thought they were the greatest things that ever were. We never thought of them as being blacks. They were just the stars of the team.

One of our basketball stars was a little Italian boy. As I think of it, of course, we drew many students from the East Side, the Smoky Hollow. We must have had a great smattering of all sorts of people. We didn't think of them in ethnic terms. They were just our friends, our classmates.

C: In conclusion, would you say there was nothing at all wrong with the Rayen School as you knew it?

B: You're right.

C: Another fine conclusion. Thank you very much, Mrs. Brenner.