

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Appliances of the Past Project

Personal Experience with Appliances

O. H. 398

ELLEN MUCKLEY

Interviewed

by

Robert Fabian

on

May 2, 1985

ELLEN MUCKLEY

Mrs. Ellen Muckley was born on August 10, 1910, in Dundee, Ohio. She lived on a farm with her family until she left for Columbus, Ohio, where she attended Ohio State University from 1928 to 1932. Mrs. Muckley graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Dietetics. For one year, Ellen Muckley worked at the Starling Loving Hospital as a Registered Dietician. After leaving this employment, Ellen Muckley worked for St. John's Hospital in 1936, and then at the Jewish Hospital from 1936 to 1937. In 1937, Ellen met Chester Muckley and married in the same year. Together they settled in North Canton. Mrs. Muckley did not work after her marriage, but chose to work as a housewife. Today, Mrs. Muckley belongs to several organizations which keep her busy outside of the home.

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INTERVIEWEE: ELLEN MUCKLEY
INTERVIEWER: Robert Fabian
SUBJECT: Past Appliances, Development and Improvement of
Appliances, Appliances as an aid to Housework
DATE: May 2, 1985

F: This is an interview with Mrs. Ellen Muckley for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. This interview is being conducted by Robert Fabian on May 2, 1985.

Would you tell me something about your background, what you remember about your parents, when you were growing up, just general things like that?

M: I was born and grew up in Dundee, Ohio, on a farm. I went to Ohio State University and took dietetics training. During the Depression, there weren't too many jobs, so I didn't work too long at my profession. We were married in 1937. My husband was in the service for five years. We settled in North Canton, built this house, and lived here ever since.

F: Do you have any children?

M: We have two children: a daughter Patricia, and a son Bruce. We also have two grandchildren; Patricia has two daughters.

F: Do you belong to any social organizations?

M: I belong to the Community Christian Church, the Ladies Literary Club, and that's mainly our activities. We like to travel. My husband takes photographs which we sometimes display to groups.

F: That's pretty interesting.

We can start off by you giving me a typical housework day of yourself, and just describe it for me.

- M: I do all of my own housework, cooking, and I make most of my clothes.
- F: You make your own clothes?
- M: Quite a few of them. We have a large garden in the summer, so I do quite a bit of freezing. Just keeping the house up takes most of my time.
- F: Do you have a schedule you work on? Some certain days laundry, or ironing . . .
- M: No, usually laundry gets done on Monday, but that just happens. No, we deliver Meals on Wheels every Wednesday, so those days we do most of our running around. We eat out and do errands.
- F: How long have you lived in this house?
- M: Thirty-eight years. We built it right after the war.
- F: These are more specific questions. How do you feel about housework? What is your opinion of it?
- M: I think it's more important than some of the people today think. Not the housework as much as the homemaking. Some people are handling working out of the home and housework and are doing it very well. I think much of it depends on how cooperative the family is.
- F: Did you get help from your husband? Did the kids, when they were younger, help you with the housework?
- M: They helped some, they weren't . . . yes, they helped.
- F: Do you take pride in cleaning house?
- M: I take pride in a nice home, but I don't think it should be the first priority of your life. I think how you handle your family and neighborhood is more important than how often you dust.
- F: Do you think doing the laundry is the most dreariest work?
- M: Not with modern conveniences. When they washed diapers, hung them out by hand, brought them in, and folded them . . . I lived in an upstairs apartment and the laundry was very inconvenient. I carried them downstairs and it was a very wearing day.

F: When you first got married or when you were helping your mother, what kind of washing machine did you have? How did you do your laundry?

M: Some by hand the first year or so, then we got a Sears washer with a wringer. We lived in an apartment with a large bathroom, and that's where we did our laundry. I had a tub that I rinsed them in and I also used the bathtub.

F: So, you handwashed a lot of things?

M: Yes, at first.

F: What happened when you got an electric washer like now? Was it a lot easier for you?

M: I got the automatic after we moved out here in the 1950's or something like that.

F: Did you find it more of a convenience then to you?

M: Sure.

F: Why is that?

M: You just put the clothes in and take them out, that's it. Before I had to run them through the wringer and have another tub for rinsing and then put them through the wringer again.

F: You still did the work by yourself?

M: Sure, I've never had any household help.

F: I thought maybe your husband or someone would give you a hand . . .

M: He helps me more now than he did when our children were young.

F: I've read in different places that even though they have all of these new inventions that the work isn't easier because it's more time-consuming because you do more laundry. What do you think?

M: No, I don't think so. Monday used to be a very weary day, especially when I had the laundry upstairs and had to scrub up afterward . . . by the time I tracked through the kitchen, I had to scrub that too and put all of these things away. Now, you just throw the clothes in the washer.

- F: With the older washers you would create more work, you would have to clean up after yourself?
- M: It was much better than doing it by hand, of course.
- F: I've read a couple of books on housework recently and a few women say that even though there were new washing machines, people would change their clothes more often and there was more laundry to do.
- M: There's more laundry, but it takes less time.
- F: That's what I thought too. What do you do with the time you aren't doing your laundry?
- M: I do more sewing, knitting, and things of that kind. I have more free time to do things in the community.
- F: It frees you more, I see. What was your old refrigerator like?
- M: It was a springhouse down in the country. We carried things down and put them in the drain from the spring to keep them cold. When we were married, we bought a used refrigerator.
- F: Was it an electric one?
- M: Yes.
- F: What was it like? Did it have an icebox?
- M: Well, it was quite a small one and was very similiar to what we have now.
- F: Was it frost-free or anything?
- M: Not the first one. The second one we got when we came out here was a wetwall, which is the term used for the first frost-free refrigerators. You didn't have to defrost; it defrosted itself and it kept the food nice and moist; you didn't have to cover it. Cans and things rested in it as it was quite moist. It was very good and lasted a long time.
- F: Do you think the new appliances to store foods like the refrigerator and freezer, changed the types of food you supplied in your home and the type of diet you had?
- M: Yes, mine changed entirely when we went to freezing.

F: How was that?

M: We could have fresh things all winter from the garden. When I was in college, I took home economics and freezing came in as a new idea.

F: In college you had some education in home economics?

M: A dietician is a home economics graduate to start with, and then you take some training in the hospital.

F: How much did that education help you in the housework, storing foods, or things like that?

M: It did help. I had ideas that I had gotten at home . . . my mother was quite good. She had eight children so she learned how to keep house. It wasn't quite as clean and neat as we have them now, but she did a good job.

F: Did you learn a lot from your mother?

M: Yes.

F: Like what?

M: Well, if you have eight children, they all have to help.

F: So, that's how you learned. Did you do the laundry for your mom or help out?

M: Yes. My brother had scarlet fever when I was in high school, and they said if he wasn't around the milk we could still sell it to the dairy. I did all of the housework while my mom took care of my brother and stayed pretty much away from all of us.

F: Did you have running water in your house on the farm, indoor plumbing?

M: We had water in the kitchen when I was quite small. We put a bathroom in when I was twelve.

F: Was that a luxury?

M: It was a luxury in the country at that time. We were very fortunate in finding a spring near the top of the hill. We were situated in the valley so that the water ran in by gravity, upstairs, to our home. We were way ahead of most of the neighbors by having the bathroom. I can vaguely remember carrying water from the spring.

F: You yourself or your brothers?

M: More my family.

F: When you were young, did you have a coal or wood stove?

M: Yes.

F: Did you ever have to help out with getting some wood or doing the cooking?

M: Sure, I didn't saw wood, but I certainly cooked many meals on the wood and coal. My brothers got the wood supply and then we would buy a little coal. That combination burns very well, you put the wood underneath then a little coal on top.

F: What was your first stove like? How did it operate?

M: It was a very ordinary kitchen range. The firebox was under two front burners; I think there were six in all. We lifted them off . . .

F: Okay, I know what you mean.

M: On the side was a reservoir that we filled with water, so that it was always warm, never real hot.

F: Did it take a lot of work to operate this?

M: Sure.

F: Did it create a mess, the coal and the wood?

M: Of course you had much more cleaning; we kept the wood on the porch outside of the kitchen. You brought in what you wanted, a few sticks at a time. We had the coal bucket sitting right there.

F: When you got married, did you get a gas stove or an electric one?

M: Our first stove was gas.

F: When did you get that?

M: When we were married in 1937, and then when we moved out here we got an electric stove. There were no gas lines here when we moved. When we moved here, there wasn't anyone else on the street.

F: Was there a difference for you between the gas and electric in the cooking or operating of them?

M: In my training, I had used both. When I was in college,

I kept house for some of the professors, and used whatever stove they had. I had to use both at various times.

F: So, you were experienced in both. Which did you prefer?

M: I like electric; it's so much cleaner.

F: Did they save you time?

M: Certainly, you had to start ahead of time when you were going to build a fire to cook. We kept a fire burning, but you let it go down during the day and when you're ready to cook you stir it up to get it going again, to get the stove hot. What's nice now too is the controls that you have. You had to produce your own type of heat for your baking and so on, and sometimes the stove didn't draw so well and you couldn't get it to burn good.

F: When you had the coal stove, did you have a wide variety of food, like you do now, or not because it took too much?

M: No, having a big family, we cooked large meals. Saturday morning somebody baked about six pies, a cake, and about six to eight loaves of bread! We baked bread twice a week. We did much more cooking then. We didn't have the fresh vegetables in the winter; we had canned things. We kept potatoes, beets, carrots, and cabbage in the cellar. The boys would bury some out in the garden in straw and in the spring, after we hadn't had anything fresh for awhile, we would dig that up and it was nice and fresh.

F: The fresh vegetables were really a luxury then?

M: They surely were. Now you buy a head of lettuce every week or few days.

F: The change from gas, wood, coal to electric didn't change the varieties of food that you prepared?

M: The cooking didn't change it, but we were able to store things from town, that changed remarkably.

F: How did you clean the rugs in your house when you were working for your mom?

M: We swept them with a broom. We had a carpet sweeper that we didn't use too much then; we took them out and beat them; I didn't do too much of that. They nailed the carpet down and it had to be taken up to be beaten. We

had linoleum in the kitchen, dining room, and stairway.

F: How often did they take the rugs outside and beat them?

M: That was spring housecleaning.

F: When did you get your first hand or electric vacuum cleaner?

M: We got one when we got married . . . I really don't remember.

F: What was your vacuum cleaner like?

M: It was a Hoover. My husband worked at the Hoover Company, so we got one shortly after we were married.

F: Did it have a lot of attachments and appliances to go with it?

M: I don't remember if we had attachments for the first one or not.

F: What type was it? Was it one of those long ones?

M: It was an upright cleaner because that's all that they had at that time; they didn't have the tank cleaners that early.

F: How long did that one last?

M: It hasn't been too long ago that somebody had it. We didn't keep it long; we got a new one and I gave it to somebody.

F: So it's probably still operating?

M: No, it isn't operating now, but it was for, I suppose, 35 years. I wouldn't say that it operated every day; somebody had it for in between pickups. We have a Hoover now, an upright and a tank.

F: Does it do an adequate job? Better than taking the carpets out and beating them?

M: Yes. I had the tank cleaner with the long hose. I was very upset with the hoses; you had to cut them off every so often and put the ends back on. I thought they should have provided a better hose. We had to have two or three different hoses.

F: They didn't work well?

- M: They worked well, but they weren't strong. The one I have now has a stronger hose but it's shorter and you have to keep pulling the cleaner around. I think somewhere in between would be better. A longer hose, but made better. I suppose they have to meet the competition.
- F: Do you have a dishwasher?
- M: Yes.
- F: Do you think that it helps you with your work of doing dishes?
- M: That, and my husband has taken up doing them since he's retired. (Laughter)
- F: How long have you had the dishwasher?
- M: Twenty or twenty-two years.
- F: Don't you think having the dishwasher . . .
- M: No, it's not that long, it's more like eighteen years.
- F: I see. What motivated you to buy a dishwasher? You still have to clean the dishes off and do some work.
- M: Well, I think it's more sanitary and it saves time. You still have some pots and pans to scrub, but it saves time.
- F: How do you mean that it saves time?
- M: Well, to put them in takes about five minutes.
- F: I don't have a dishwasher.
- M: You run it about once a day and then they are all clean.
- F: I see. Instead of doing dishes three times a day, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, you do them once?
- M: Well, you don't really do them, you turn it on.
- F: Then you just turn it on. When you got these new appliances for instance, your blender, stove or dishwasher, what motivated you to buy it? Was it the idea that they would help you and ease your workload? What were your thoughts behind it?
- M: Laundry is a load of work, but being trained in home economics and having lived in these professors' homes during college, I was familiar with all of those things.

- F: Did you ever have any trouble with them or thought that you should have just kept the old style thing?
- M: No, I had more trouble learning the use of a microwave more than anything else.
- F: How do you like the microwave?
- M: I like it, I wouldn't want to give it up, but I still have things to learn. It also has the convection in it which makes it much more complicated because you have to learn different types of cooking. It's great for some things; some things I like better the old way. It was quite hard to learn because you had to learn to use the microwave alone and then the combination of the two. Everything has to be timed so accurately or it isn't fit to eat.
- F: Could you compare the way you did your housework when you first got married to the way you do it now? Do you think it's easier or do you think it's still just as demanding and time consuming, because you have to put the effort into it?
- M: Outside of the washer, we had most of the conveniences from the beginning of my marriage.
- F: How can you compare it then to the way your mother had it?
- M: That's a different story.
- F: Do you think it's still demanding, today's housework?
- M: Nothing like it was. I think that's why women are working outside of the home.
- F: How is it different? Is it less time . . .
- M: Less time. If we didn't have all of the outdoors, I wouldn't be as busy as I am.
- F: Do you think you have it better off than your mother?
- M: Well, it's much easier.
- F: It's still there though. It's not ever going to go away.
- M: They keep promising us someday that it will, but I don't see it.
- F: Do you think the new appliances in the kitchen cause you to spend time in the kitchen?

M: No.

F: Even though you have a blender and a fabulous cookbook and can make up all of these new dishes?

M: After all, you have to take your health into consideration too. More and more we are finding that all of the complicated things we were doing, like the six pies on Saturday, were not really good for our health. We cook more simply than I used too, and of course there are only the two of us.

F: You are able to get out of the kitchen more then?

M: Sure.

F: Would you say the appliances helped you to get out of the kitchen?

M: Sure. Some of us use the time we save to our advantage, some of us don't.

F: Do you think the time you save gives you more time for other work that you have to do or does it free you, is it liberating?

M: It's liberating, of course.

F: Do you think that you do more work that you wouldn't have time to do if you didn't have these appliances?

M: You didn't keep your house quite as clean when you had to do it all by hand. Permanent press has helped a great deal with your time . . .

F: . . . in doing the laundry. What kind of iron did you first have?

M: My mother had ones that you heated on the stove.

F: Was the ironing pretty difficult to do like that?

M: Yes, especially if you got the stove dirty and then the iron got dirty. You also had to change irons as the one you were using cooled off. We got an electric iron when we rebuilt the house, when I was twelve. My father did a pretty good job of farming and we had some of those conveniences before the neighbors.

F: You were a little bit . . .

M: We had some advantages.

- F: That's good. Do you think if someone took away an appliance you could do your job just as good, or are you dependent on these appliances now?
- M: We go camping, and that's very simple.
- F: So, you still can go back to the old way?
- M: I wouldn't like to go back to the old laundry. When we are out camping, we stop and do our laundry, but we do our own cooking. We just have a small pop-up camper and we live pretty comfortably. We spent nine weeks when we went to Alaska.
- F: You went to Alaska, wow!
- M: It wasn't too serious.
- F: You wouldn't mind doing your own cooking outside . . .
- M: We have a gas stove in our trailer. We didn't do much cooking out on an open fire; we charcoaled. You can work simply and comfortably.
- F: But, you wouldn't want to go back without these tools in the house, right?
- M: Well, I would rather have them, sure.
- F: Do you think these appliances helped women leave the home to work and be in society?
- M: How else could you do it; you didn't have the time before.
- F: I've read some things pertaining to housework and some women say that it isn't helpful because the work is still there.
- M: Well, you can't go away and forget it. If you're not here it doesn't get done, but if you plan your time it becomes a routine and you can get away with it. If I didn't have that big yard, I would have more free time for things like sewing and hobbies.
- F: Do you think of sewing as work? You said you made some of your own clothes. Is that work to you or more pleasurable?
- M: It's both.
- F: Darning socks . . .
- M: No, I don't darn socks. (Laughter)

I had quit sewing and then we started square dancing. If you buy your square dance clothes, everyone else has the same thing, so that's when I started to sew again. We wore simple clothes back twenty years ago and it seemed silly to make all of these ruffled dresses and go out and buy the others so I started making most of my clothes. It's work but it's pleasure too. Once you get started it's fun, but it's hard to get settled down and start to do it.

F: You must feel good about doing housework then. It's work but yet you enjoy it.

M: I enjoy it.

F: Do you take pride in your housework?

M: I take pride in it, but I don't think it's the one objective in life to have the cleanest house.

F: If you had to nail down one specific type of appliance that you feel really helped women or yourself in the home, which would that be?

M: I think the washer would be it.

F: Why is that?

M: It's a lot of work. I can remember when we heated water on the stove, you had to fill the boiler and heat the water, transfer it to the washing machine . . .

F: This is with your mom?

M: Yes. We had a washer that went sideways, then you had to wring them out, put them in rinse water, wring them again, and put them out on the line. I think that was the heaviest work that it saved, outside of having water in the house.

F: That changed a lot of things.

M: Electricity, all the things that you can do with electricity.

F: Is there anything that I haven't hit on that you think is important about housework, how you feel about it, appliances . . . Do you think that manufacturers make the appliances to help with the housework? Do you think that's their motive for developing things?

M: They develop things because it makes money. They have to

please the public to make money. I used to see all of those men working at the Hoover Company and these various places and really realize they were just doing our housework for us, making it easier for us. But that wasn't their prime objective. Their prime objective, of course, was to make a living. They did have to fit things to the situation; that was a sale. I think we have gone beyond reason in some of the advertising we do today, and the couponing; I think couponing is for the birds.

F: Really?

M: All of the money they spend on it, and the man who raises the food gets very little of it. You can only eat so much so you can only sell so much. I think with overcompetition . . . we sit here and cut coupons. I got \$3.80 last week, so you can't not do it, so when somebody else has a better coupon I'll buy his product. I think the whole thing is extremely out of hand.

F: Not beyond reason, but if there was something that you wanted invented to help you with the house what do you think it would be? What would you like to see that would help you out?

M: I think I'm getting too old for that. I can't think of anything offhand. We are ready to start cutting back rather than expanding things.

F: Ultimately, you think these appliances have helped save you time and eased your work?

M: Yes, now you have to go out and jog to get your exercise.

F: It's never too late. That's all of the questions I have.

END OF INTERVIEW