

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Appliances of the Past Project

Effects of Appliances on Life

O.H. 427

ANNA GUENTHER

Interviewed

by

Robert Fabian

on

May 23, 1985

ANNA GUENTHER

Mrs. Anna Guenther was born on October 14, 1912 in Akron, Ohio. Her family moved to Cuyahoga Falls to live on a farm. Anna graduated from Cuyahoga Falls High School in 1931. She moved to North Canton in 1932 to work for Dr. A. R. Basinger doing housework and office work. In 1935, she married Otto Guenther and quit her job with Dr. Basinger. Mrs. Guenther did not hold outside employment after her marriage, yet belongs to numerous social organizations which keep her busy in the community.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Appliances of the Past Project

INTERVIEWEE: ANNA GUENTHER

INTERVIEWER: Robert Fabian

SUBJECT: Appliances, Appliance Companies, Women's Housework

DATE: May 23, 1985

F: This is an interview with Mrs. Anna Guenther for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project, Hoover Company. This interview is being conducted by Robert Fabian on May 23, 1985

We will just start off with some basic questions. You can tell me anything about your background, where you are from . . .

G: I was born in Akron and graduated from Cuyahoga Falls High School. I was married in Cuyahoga Falls in 1935. I came to North Canton and worked for Dr. Basinger in 1932 for three years. My four brothers were all in the army during World War II and served in Europe. They returned safely, only my oldest brother was hit in the back by shrapnel. He recuperated, although he still has small particles in his body. My parents are from Austria-Hungary. They are of German descent and we spoke German at home. They could speak Hungarian because they learned it at school.

F: When did they come over from Europe?

G: I think my mother came in 1910 and my father came two years before that. Mother came to Akron because she had an older brother living there and that's where they met. My father was rooming there.

F: So you first lived in Akron?

G: Yes. We had moved to Cuyahoga Falls, first to Northampton township, on a farm. After three years, we moved into Cuyahoga Falls.

F: So you first lived on a farm?

- G: Not first, no. Later on. About 1921 we lived on the farm, and then 1924 we moved to Cuyahoga Falls and stayed there until I finished high school.
- F: Did you come to North Canton after you got married?
- G: Before I got married. In 1932 I came to North Canton and we were married in 1935.
- F: Why did you come to North Canton?
- G: I got a job with Dr. Basinger. I had been working in Akron, but didn't like my job. The girl that was working for Dr. Basinger was a friend of mine and we corresponded. She said that she could read between the lines of my letter; I was looking for another job. She told me that she was planning on getting married and wondered if I was interested in the job. I said, yes, I would be. I called long distance and talked to Dr. Basinger, and they wanted me to come in to talk to them. I did and a couple of weeks later I got the job.
- F: What kind of work did you do? Were you a nurse . . .
- G: I helped in the house part-time and then in his office. His office was where the "Y" is now in North Canton on South Street. His office was downstairs in two rooms and they lived in the other part of the house. I had both responsibilities.
- F: You helped with the housework and the office work?
- G: Yes. Later on, they hired another girl to help with the housework, so I helped more in the office, which I liked.
- F: You liked office work better?
- G: Yes, I liked that better. Helping patients . . . I did quite a bit. If they had minor surgery, I helped; I got all the instruments ready.
- F: He was a general surgeon?
- G: He was a general practitioner.
- F: How long did you work for him?
- G: Three years.
- F: Did you quit after you got married?

G: Yes.

F: What kind of schooling did you have . . .

G: I graduated from high school.

F: What kind of church did you belong to when you got married?

G: We are Roman Catholic, both of us.

F: What kind of social organizations are you involved in, either before or now?

G: I belong to the Women's Altar Rosary Society at church, the Catholic Order of Foresters, L.C.B.A , which is a fraternal insurance company, also AARP 1400, which meets at the United Church of Christ, and we belong to the North Canton Senior Citizens.

F: What kind of general things do you have to do in all these organizations that you're in?

G: I'm not as involved as I was when I was younger. The senior citizens have quite a lot of activities. I'm the secretary, and I think I am going on my seventh year. They have trips and social functions. We belong to the Y.M.C.A. and go swimming every Tuesday and Thursday. We also volunteer at the House of Loreto, which is a nursing home. We also go to St. Luke's on Friday afternoons to visit with the patients.

F: It's a pretty busy schedule?

G: It is; we don't have too much time and people wonder what we're doing. I don't spend much time at home anymore.

F: That's good to be out . . .

G: Well, yes, but sometimes my house suffers.

F: What do you remember about your parents or family when you were younger? What kind of home life was it?

G: We had a good home life, but it was hard. I had four brothers, one sister, and I am the oldest. My dad worked at the rubber shops; he worked at Goodyear for many years. When we moved to the farm in Northampton, he transferred to Falls Rubber. Falls Rubber is where Lawsons Dairy is now in Cuyahoga Falls. He lost his

job, like many others during the Depression, which was a very difficult time. Finally, they had to sell their home or else they would lose it completely . . .

F: How did your family deal with the Depression? Did you all work together?

G: Yes, I had a brother who went into the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camps; two brothers got paper routes; my sister and I did housework and babysitting, and my mother also went out and did housework. My father was on WPA [Works Progress Administration] and it was very difficult. When they moved from Cuyahoga Falls, they went on a sharecropping farm on Steels Corners Road. They stayed there for about three years, then they bought some property in Suffield, it was also a farm, mostly a celery farm. It was a difficult time; they worked so hard and didn't make much money. They sold that and bought a farm on Route 44 about a mile north of New Baltimore, between New Baltimore and Randolph.

F: Are you still living at home . . .

G: No, I was gone by then. They lived in Cuyahoga Falls when we were married, so it must have been about 1937 or 1938 when they moved to that farm on Steels Corners Road. My mother is still living, but my dad has been gone since 1955. I have a brother who is not married that lives with her and they still have that farm, although they don't really farm it. They rent most of the land out. The neighbor has cows and plants it. They have a little bit of a garden and fruit trees, but outside of that they don't do any farming. I think there are 33 acres.

F: You really experienced the Depression years.

G: Oh yes!

F: You can appreciate everything that you have now?

G: Absolutely, yes.

F: That's what my parents tell me . . .

G: It was a very difficult time. We never owned a car as long as I was home; we couldn't afford it.

F: You were just like a lot of other families, I'm sure.

G: Yes. My brothers went to a couple of dumps and found bicycle parts and got enough together to build their first bicycle.

F: That's what you had to do. After you got married, did you work any time out of the home?

G: No, I never did.

F: Did you want to?

G: Well, I did after the war started and they started hiring women. I talked about going, but I had two, small children; my daughter was just a baby. My husband wouldn't let me go to work.

F: You just have two children?

G: Well, we had three, but we lost our oldest son.

F: I'm sorry to hear that.

G: Yes, it was very, very difficult. He was forty years old when he died. He had five children and was killed in a railroad accident. He worked for Conrail.

F: Wow. I'm sorry to hear that. Is your husband still alive?

G: Yes, he's outside.

F: Oh, I didn't see anybody . . .

G: Well, he was in the backyard.

F: How long have you lived in this house?

G: Since 1968.

F: What was your other house like?

G: It's just next door. We built that in 1938.

F: And then you bought this property . . .

G: We bought these lots quite a number of years afterward. We had heard that they were for sale and I told my husband that we ought to buy them. They were only 40 feet wide and there were two of them. At one time, the man that owned them worked with my husband. My husband was a tool and die maker. He asked me what I wanted them for, and I said it would be nice to have because it was all wooded; our children played here. It was like a park for them to play in. Later on, this man sold these lots to another couple and they were going to build a duplex on it. This isn't zoned for duplex; it's for family, so another duplex became available behind the high school. The man died and the woman wanted to sell it, so they bought that and

put this up for sale. We found out about it through a friend of ours that had inquired about them. He said that it was too much money. Originally, we could have had both lots for \$500 apiece, but these people bought them both for \$1750, so they wanted \$2000, only \$250 more than they paid for it. This friend of ours thought that it was too much money, so I told my husband that it wasn't and we would call them up and write them a check . . . (laughter)

F: That definitely was a good investment.

G You couldn't touch this for \$10,000 now.

F: Definitely not. When you were living with your parents, did they have running water at home?

G: Not on the farm. We lived on two farms actually; we lived in Rootstown when I was six years old. My dad was still working at the Goodyear and he stayed in town with my uncle, my mother's brother, and that just didn't work out. In about a year's time, they sold the farm, and we moved into Akron again. When we lived in Northampton township, we didn't have any electricity, running water, or anything, not even a furnace. We had a heating stove in the living room. When we lived there we went to a one-room schoolhouse. There were only eight grades and only one teacher. We had a potbelly stove in the middle of the room for heat in the winter time. The teacher had to start the fire before school started. There was no indoor plumbing. We had a small stand with a wash basin on it so we could wash our hands. The water pump was beside the schoolhouse. We also filled a bucket with drinking water. Each child had his own collapsible drinking cup and we used a dipper to get the water out of the bucket. We carried our own lunch every day except one day in the month. There was a small church beside the schoolhouse and the women from the Aid Society cooked a full meal that day. It cost only 25¢ and the children all went there. This schoolhouse was located on the corner of Steels Corners Road and State Road, which was approximately two and one half miles from where we lived. We had to walk because there was no transportation. In the winter time we wore long underwear and knee-high boots. This was the year from 1921 to 1922.

The following year we went to another one-room schoolhouse which was closer, but we had to go through woods and cross a creek to get there. When the creek overflowed we had difficulty crossing it. If it was too high there was a young man who lived close by who put his hip boots on and carried us across.

The last year we lived there which was 1923 and 1924, we went back to Steels Corners School, but had transportation. The school board bought a closed horse-drawn school wagon. Our neighbors' son used their team of horses. He was eighteen years old, but went to school to learn the English language because he had recently come from Europe where he lived with his grandparents. He was able to keep the horses in a shed close to the school. We were able to speak with him because he spoke German.

F: On the farm, who did all the work to get the coal, clean around, and get the wood . . .

G: My father and uncle. I was between eight and nine when we got there, and we lived there three years. I wasn't quite twelve. My mother and aunt lived there too. They did most of the work because dad and my uncle worked in Cuyahoga Falls at Falls Rubber. My uncle had a Model T Ford.

F: How was it to get the water to do the clothes . . .

G: Well, we had a pump, a well right in back of the house, and we pumped it.

F: Do you have to boil the water to get it heated?

G: Yes. We had a kerosine stove that they heated and in the summer time they had the stove outside . . .

F: It was too hot to be inside?

G: Yes. We had a big tool shed in back of the house where we kept some tools, and tubs. We didn't have a washer; my mother didn't have a washer. She used a washboard, two galvanized tubs, and a hand ringer.

F: Did you help her?

G: Oh yes, definitely.

F: What kind of soap did they use?

G: They made their own soap, the lye soap. In fact, I still have some that my mother had made years ago. She loved to make soap; they used to save fat for her. They boiled their clothes to keep them white. There was no such thing as bleach. She used to use soap flakes. I remember the Climalene water softener. Sometimes in the summer,

we bathed outside in the backyard. We took a big, galvanized tub and set it out in the sun. The sun would heat the water. Our property was divided by the road, and there was a creek on both sides and my dad and uncle would go down there, take along soap and a towel, and bathe in the creek. (Laughter)

F: That's how a lot of families were doing it though?

G: Yes.

F: What was a typical work day like? Did your mother have Monday as a wash day, Tuesdays . . .

G: Yes. Tuesdays were ironing days because you had to dry clothes outside. My mother had heavy irons, with a handle that clipped on the iron, and she heated them on the stove. She had two or three, so that one could be heating as she used the other. That's what they used to iron; they had to dampen their clothes . . . It took longer to iron. I used to help her; I started out ironing sheets, handkerchiefs, and just flat things, that's all.

F: Through your mother you learned how to do a lot of housework?

G: Oh, absolutely!

F: How did they clean their rugs?

G: Well, they swept them with a broom, and maybe once a year took them outside, hung them on the line, and used a carpet beater. We didn't have a sweeper until after we moved to Cuyahoga Falls. Of course, we didn't have electricity.

F: When you moved to Cuyahoga Falls, did you have running water?

G: Yes, we had everything.

F: When was this?

G: 1924.

F: Did you start getting more home appliances then?

G: Yes. The first washer my mother got, she bought a used water power from someone; you connect the hose to the spigot which provided the water power and it had an agitator that moved back and forth. If things

were too dirty, a lot of times she would wash them on the washboard first and then put them in the washer.

F: Did she find it easier with the agitator? Did it lighten her work load?

G: Yes.

F: When you first got married, what kind of washer did you have?

G: I had an old electric washer. It was a used one that my mother-in-law had. She got it from someone because she used to do housework too, and it belonged to one of those families.

F: What did it look like?

G: It was a real bulky thing. When I worked for Basinger's they had one too. It had a tumbler, and it tumbled the wash. It had wood slats inside that were the cleaning apparatus for your clothes, just like the agitator. Some of them went back and forth, and I've seen ones that had plungers . . .

F: These were electrical?

G: Yes. When we lived on the farm, we had neighbors that had a washing machine they had to work by hand, back and forth. They had two boys who used to have to do it and boy did they hate that. They had to come home from school and do the wash.

F: When did you get your first modern washer?

G: I think it was after we moved into this house next door. We lived in an apartment for three years, and that whole time I think I had the old one. After 1938, I think I got an Easy Washer.

F: Did you buy it with cash, or credit installments?

G: We probably bought on credit because we didn't have much money.

F: Yes, that was still during the Depression. Was it that much different from the one that you previously used?

G: The other one was a tumbler action, and this one was an agitator.

F: What kind do you have now?

G: I have a Sears automatic. This is my second automatic; before that I had two or three Easy Washers, then I got an automatic. I don't know what the first model was. This one is a Sears and is twenty years old. One of these days it's going to stop, but my husband keeps fixing it. He has replaced three pumps on it already. Being a tool and die maker, he's pretty handy.

F: In twenty years just replacing a couple of pumps is not that much . . .

G: No.

F: Compared to the kind of work your mother was doing with the washboard and things like that.

G: That's right.

F: I've read several books before I started these interviews, and one woman said that even though they invented these new washers, the laundry was still the most dreaded housework and the most time consuming. What do you think?

G: That's true, it is, but it's nothing like it was. I still like to do my laundry on Monday, and I can do my washing and ironing in one day because it's just the two of us.

F: Were you able to do your laundry and ironing in one day, when you had all your children at home?

G: No.

F: It was still a lot of work?

G: Yes. I washed at least three times a week.

F: Now you can do it in one day?

G: Yes, because of the difference in fabrics too. You don't have to iron so much.

F: The difference in clothing makes it easier too then?

G: Yes. My mother is 90 years old . . .

F: I should talk to your mother.

G: She's so confused; it's pathetic. She'll be 91 in August, and she has Alzheimers disease.

F: You mentioned before that your parents had a cast iron stove. What was it like to cook on that? Did you do any cooking?

G: I didn't do much cooking, I was only eleven years old. We had mostly vegetable soup anyway.

F: So it was just like a one . . .

G: One dish most of the time, yes. There were six children; my youngest brother was born about two months before we moved away; I can remember when he was born; it was a rainy Sunday . . .

F: When you moved away from the farm, what was your first modern stove? Was it electric or gas?

G: Gas.

F: Can you describe it? Was it still the big type?

G: It was the big type with a side oven.

F: Was it difficult to operate?

G: No, not really. I remember it because it was my job to clean that thing every week. (Laughter)

F: How much work was it to clean compared to the coal . . .

G: You had to take the burners off. It got pretty messy. In fact, I remember one job where I worked; I was a freshman in high school. The job was just a couple of blocks from us and it was Saturday. My job was to clean up the kitchen, and one time I took the stove apart and asked the woman if she ever had the stove apart; she said once in a while.

F: How often did you have to do it at home?

G: Every week.

F: Once a week?

G: Yes, unless we spilled something. It had a catch tray underneath and we could pull the tray out and wash it off pretty well. I took the whole thing apart, burners and everything; that was my job.

F: When did you replace that stove with a more modern adaption?

- G: I'm not quite sure. It was probably in 1938.
- F: What was the first type of stove you had when you were first married?
- G: It was a gas stove and was fairly modern. It had a cover where it slid down in the back of it so you could pull it up and then cover the whole thing.
- F: Was this the kind of gas stove that you had to light with a match?
- G: This had a pilot light, but the one my mother had, we had to light it with a match. When I worked for Basinger's they had one too.
- F: How did the food you made change after you got the gas from when you had the cast iron? Did you have more variety of foods because . . .
- G: Well, we did. The baking was different because when my mother lived on the farm she baked her own bread, but after that she didn't bake bread anymore.
- F: Was it easier to cook . . .
- G: Yes.
- F: You've stuck with gas, do you find that it's easier?
- G: Well, it's just that I got used to it.
- F: When you were living on your farm, what kind of refrigeration did you have?
- G: We didn't have anything.
- F: Nothing?
- G: We had a cellar in the basement; it was just dug out under the house. It had a dirt floor . . .
- F: Was it like a root cellar?
- G: Yes. We had a creek with cold water and we put stuff in there.
- F: What kind of stuff?
- G: We didn't have anything like frozen foods, we canned things, and because of living on the farm we had our own milk, eggs, and butter. We didn't get much meat.

On his way home from work, my dad would stop and get meat. We didn't have anything except when they butchered. We had some pigs and in the fall they were butchered, so we had smoked ham, sausage, and chicken.

F: Did your variety of food change from season to season?

G: Yes, it was all right. We had carrots, onions, potatoes, fruits, tomatoes, and whatever they canned; that would keep. We didn't have too many fresh vegetables except what would keep for a certain length of time.

F: Did you get an icebox first?

G: Yes, we had an icebox after we moved into town. I don't remember when my mother got an electric refrigerator; we had an icebox for as long as I can remember. We had an iceman who delivered the ice. When we didn't have an icebox, we had a tub, and they would fill that with ice and put a rug or something over it.

F: After the ice melted, did that entail a lot of work?

G: It wasn't too bad. The icebox had a pan and I had to watch that it wouldn't run over. We had to watch that.

F: After you got married, did you get an electric . . .

G: Not right away. I think my in-laws gave us an icebox; we had that for quite awhile. In the winter time, we had a window box.

F: What's a window box?

G: A metal box that you put on the outside of the window.

F: Could you store just about anything in it?

G: Yes. You would just open the window . . . (Laughter)
The first refrigerator we got was a rebuilt used one. It seemed to run all of the time.

F: Do you remember when you got it?

G: 1936 or 1937.

F: After the war, in the 1950's, did you get a lot of different appliances in your home?

G: I got a clothes dryer and an automatic washer. My sewing machine was the last model that Sears made

at the beginning of the war. They had to quit making all those things, and that was the last model that they made.

F: Do you still have that now?

G: Yes. It still works.

F: When did you get that?

G: Around 1940, or something like that.

F: Did you use it just for your home and family or did you do sewing outside?

G: No.

F: When did you get your first vacuum cleaner? Did you have one when you got married?

G: My mother-in-law had an old one, but I don't know what kind it was. She gave it to us to use.

F: What was it like?

G: It looked a little bit like a Hoover, on that same order. It was pretty old and didn't last too long.

F: Did it have a lot of attachments to it?

G: No, it didn't have any attachments.

F: How good of quality was it?

G: It was fair.

F: What kind did you replace that with?

G: I have the Hoover that I replaced it with.

F: You still have it?

G: Yes, we have another Hoover and we have a Hoover canister and also an electric broom because I can't push the sweeper anymore; my back is in bad shape, but my husband uses that. We have another old Hoover that our daughter-in-law had; our son was killed. She swept the garage and everything with it, and got it in such bad shape that it wouldn't run anymore. She was going to throw it out, so my husband brought it home and took it all apart. He got a few parts for it and now it works really good.

F: Do you have a dishwasher?

G: Yes.

F: How do you like it?

G: I don't use it too often for just two people.

F: When did you get the dishwasher?

G: When we built the house, in 1968.

F: How come you don't use it too often?

G: Well, for two people you don't have that many dishes.

F: Do you use it when you have your family over?

G: Yes, when I have company or when I clean my cupboards.

F: Do you think it works just as well as you doing the dishes yourself? Does it save that much time?

G: I think in doing glasses and that type of thing, but with two people it takes longer to run a dishwasher than to do it by hand.

F: You still have to clean the dishes off before you put them in . . .

G: You do that and sometimes the glasses have spots on them and I have to wipe them off anyway. I don't like to put them away with spots on them.

F: Do you think it really helps and eases your work?

G: Not for me, I don't think it does. It's alright if I have company or something. I know some women who let their dishes pile up for days and I can't stand that.

F: You're like my family . . .

G: My husband thinks they should be done right away. He has been doing breakfast dishes a lot.

F: Your husband is retired?

G: Yes.

F: So he is helping you with the housework inside?

G: He scrubs the floors, runs the sweeper, usually does the breakfast and lunch dishes, unless he has something special to do.

- F: Did you ever have any other household help?
- G: When I was sick a few times and couldn't do things, I did have some help. I'm going to have some women in here to do my walls and woodwork, but outside of that I do it myself.
- F: Did you have time, when you were first married, to go to these different organizations?
- G: I had the time, but I didn't have any money. The first year we were married my husband only earned seven hundred dollars. We were living on a shoestring.
- F: When these new products came out, what enticed you to buy them? Was it the fact that they would ease your workload? Did you listen to the advertisements?
- G: Yes, I did. I wasn't too keen about an automatic washer or even a dryer, until the neighbor lady got one and told me that if I ever got one I'd never change.
- F: Do you still hang your clothes outside?
- G: I do when it's nice.
- F: Why?
- G: Because I like the fresh air.
- F: Even though it's more work bringing the clothes out of the basement and outside?
- G: Yes. I know people think I'm crazy. (Laughter)
- F: No, you're just like my mother.
- G: My mother wouldn't have a dryer. It would be a lot easier, but my sister does most of it. I have a sister who is a widow and goes there every weekend when she's at home. She bathes mother, cleans the house, and does the laundry.
- F: How do you feel about housework? Do you think it's a rewarding type of job?
- G: I think if it's done right it is rewarding. I like to see a clean house. If things aren't done right, it bothers me. It's an irritation, or maybe because my mother was that way and I was brought up with it, and then having worked for different people; I'm just that way. I know sometimes I press myself to the limit trying to get things done right.

- F: Can you compare making a meal like you do today as to the way your mother had to do it then?
- G: It took longer; you had to prepare farther ahead. On the farm especially, because they had to bring the wood in for the fire. This stove also had a compartment where they heated their water, on the side, so that they could have hot water. The water had to be heated by the stove, and if they were baking the oven had to get hot enough.
- F: Cooking the meals during it was more work too?
- G: Yes.
- F: How is it now for you?
- G: It's kind of a breeze now.
- F: How about doing the laundry, is it similar?
- G: Yes, it's easier. The synthetic material makes a tremendous difference.
- F: So you feel that you have it better than your mother did?
- G: Definitely.
- F: How does she feel about all of this now?
- G: She kind of takes it in stride. She still doesn't want an automatic washer or dryer.
- F: She still wants it the traditional old way. Do you think if someone took away all of these different appliances you could go back and do the work just like your mother did?
- G: I don't think so.
- F: You wouldn't want to?
- G: I wouldn't want to; I'm too old for that.
- F: How about when you first . . .
- G: Well, if you don't know any better, it's not that much of a chore. You just take it . . . just like the Amish do.
- F: Do you think these appliances have pretty much liberated you?

- G: To a certain extent, I think so.
- F: Which ways haven't they?
- G: You still have to do it. The work is still there, but now it's just easier.
- F: Do you think it's because of a lot of these new appliances that you are able to get involved with these organizations and have more time?
- G: Yes, you wouldn't have the time otherwise.
- F: You would spend most of your day just doing the wash?
- G: Sure.
- F: If there was one appliance that you couldn't do without, what would it be, if you had to narrow it down to one?
- G: I think my automatic washer.
- F: The laundry is the worst thing . . .
- G: Yes, definitely. I just can't see having to go back to the way it was before.
- F: If there was something that you wished was invented, what would that be?
- G: Something that would clean your house completely from top to bottom in a day, or something like that! (Laughter) Dust-free, and a window washer. . . .
- F: That would be a good appliance. . . .
- G: That's a chore.
- F: After your kids went away, did you ever consider going back to work?
- G: I did at one time, but then my husband wouldn't let me.
- F: He didn't want you to go?
- G: No.
- F: That's all I need.

END OF INTERVIEW