

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

Alice L. Brown

Part 1

Oral History of Alice L. Brown, part 1 of 2

conducted by

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and filmed by

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Interviewer: *Today is May 15, 2013. We're at the Gibson Branch of the Henderson District Public Libraries in Henderson, Nevada. My name is Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm and our cameraman is Ed Feldman. Today we are interviewing Alice Brown as part of the Henderson Oral History Project at the Henderson Libraries. Thank you so much for participating, Alice. I'd like to start by asking about your childhood. Where and when were you born?*

Alice Brown: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and I used to know the name of the hospital. Oh, Mount Sinai.

Interviewer: *And can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what your parents did for a living?*

Alice Brown: My father worked for New York Central Railroad as a draftsman for them at that time and we lived in Cleveland Heights, which is a suburb of Cleveland. And then when I was nine years old, we moved out to the country where my great-great grandfather had been the first minister in the Connecticut Western Reserve. And what the Connecticut Western Reserve was, at one time back in the late 1700s or early 1800s, they allotted—because Connecticut and Massachusetts didn't have much territory, they allocated them the width, the parallels of their country's territory, Connecticut in Ohio just west of the Pennsylvania border and Michigan—Massachusetts, some went to Michigan. Did I say Massachusetts before or did I say Michigan? But Massachusetts never implemented theirs. But Connecticut did have—they sent people out there and settled that border along the lake, Lake Erie. They settled that, and that is where Western Reserve at the University and the name Western Reserve comes from, is from that. And my great-great grandfather was the first settled minister in the Western Reserve. They had had itinerant ministers, but he was the first one and he built a house there in a town called

Austinburg, which is about half way between Cleveland and the Pennsylvania border. And it's a small town, still is a small town. And so he built a house there, and my great uncle was living there and there was a family living there too, but he had asthma bad and I believe that's why we moved out there, both to take care of him and also to keep the house in the family because it was the house that my great-grandfather built. It was built in about 1803 and it is still standing.

Interviewer: *That's amazing.*

Alice Brown: And it's still in the family. My older sister had four children and, well, our family was—had—there were three girls. I have two sisters; there were three girls. And my oldest sister had two daughters and my next sister had three daughters and then when I was—after I got married and I was out West and my parents had come out for the birth of my first one and my sister called and said she had a boy and my father said, "I'll believe it when I see it." And later I had a boy, so I have two boys and two girls, but until then, all the grandchildren had been granddaughters, no boys.

Interviewer: *Funny, how funny. [laughter]*

Alice Brown: But we moved out there when we were—when I was nine.

Interviewer: *And that's where you went to school.*

Alice Brown: Yes. Of course before that I had—I did a chronology, the things I picked up from—both from my memory and from the records I had somewhere. And, you know, I still remember it somewhat: when I was five, I had gone to the grocery store with my mother and the grocery store was across a rather busy road, which had a median in the middle between the two lanes, and she forgot bread. And we had gone back across the road and I said, "Oh, I'll go get it," so I

got almost across the first half of the road and I saw a car coming so I ran back to mother. And he saw me and tried to stop but he—because I was running, he ran over my ankle.

Interviewer: *Aaah. How awful.*

Alice Brown: Well, I enjoyed it because, well, he took us down to the doctor and they fixed it up and then I was the thing of the neighborhood.

Interviewer: *You were the star. [laughter]*

Alice Brown: They fixed up a wheel chair for me, so I was shoved all around the neighborhood.

[laughter] I enjoyed it. But that was when I was five, so by the time we moved out to the country I was—and we owned, well, in the family we owned quite a bit of land. Well, I don't know how good you are on acreage but we—for about a mile back along an unpaved road, we owned the property and we owned some across the road too. And there was, well, the people that had been living there with my great uncle had done some farming and we did some. Had cows and chickens and horses, managed them and the rest of it and grew most of our own vegetables and so forth. So I lived in the country and when we wanted to play, we would go across the road. We were across from the cemetery, which—and the woods around there, and there was a creek running through. And there was a heavier woods back still on our property, and that had a creek. And there also was a river called Grand River that was not too far away. And so we had swimming in either of the creeks or the river and—

Interviewer: *Did you fish?*

Alice Brown: —walking in the woods and stuff like that. We didn't fish much. They did—other people did fish but we didn't fish much. I think in the creeks we played with the fish, but they weren't edible fish. So we had a school in town and, well, actually there was Grand River

Academy which is still—an offshoot of it is still in town, but it was a well thought of high school age academy that attracted students from all over the county.

Interviewer: *How many students were there?*

Alice Brown: Well, oh, in our grade school and—let me see, oh it was—oh, I think we had twenty or so in each class.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Alice Brown: Yeah, so it was, well—

Interviewer: *Very small, not a lot of people lived in the county.*

Alice Brown: Well, in—we had a separate school for each town in the county.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Alice Brown: But there were several towns in the county and we, well, we—they had back in those days, they didn't have buses. But we, they had what would almost look to people like a stagecoach or something: horses pulling a bus, what they had. So when we went to grade school, we got on, and that traveled up to the school. After we got to high school, we walked to school. It was a mile.

Interviewer: *You didn't have horses?*

Alice Brown: No. No, people didn't ride horses there. We had cars.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Alice Brown: Model Ts and an old Studebaker, I think, things like that. But they had some cars, but not very many, and so we walked to high school.

Interviewer: *And I bet you were about at the top of your class, weren't you?*

Alice Brown: No, not—well, close to it.

Interviewer: *How did you decide you were going to college?*

Alice Brown: Oh, well, my oldest sister had gone to college. And my other sister had gone to business college and got married shortly after that. And so I went to college. I didn't go to the college my sister had gone to; I think I had gotten tired of following. And so I went to—she went to Hiram College, which is in Ohio, and I went to Allegheny, which was in Pennsylvania.

Interviewer: *And then you studied Library Science.*

Alice Brown: Yes, at Carnegie in Pittsburgh.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Alice Brown: And then, if you want me to go on with my life, after that my first job I had was out in Kirkwood, Missouri, which is a suburb of St. Louis between St. Louis and the Mississippi River. And I was out there for just a little over a year I think.

Interviewer: *And this is before you joined the Women's Army Corp?*

Alice Brown: Yeah. That was in '41, '42. And then—yeah [laughter]—and, well, I don't know whether I cook up stories, but I have interesting stories about all the places. Where we went through Basic [Training] was in Daytona Beach, Florida. And, of course, the WAC's were new; it was a new thing. So what they did for quarters for us during Basic was put us in a hotel. They took over a hotel and we got up—I think we had our first classes in the morning and before six o'clock.

Interviewer: *Oh, gosh.*

Alice Brown: But before that, we had to clean up a hotel room. We had to pick up everything and put it back in hotel room condition before our first thing. So it was sort of interesting.

[laughter]

Interviewer: *Who was your commanding officer? Who was supervising this?*

Alice Brown: Well, we—I think they had officers that they had trained. I don't know. They had probably been trained.

Interviewer: *Was it a woman?*

Alice Brown: Oh, yes, yes. They didn't have any—we didn't have any contact with the men at all as far as Basic went. And I'm not sure whether—I don't remember whether I picked or somehow I got into baker's—cook school.

Interviewer: *They assigned you to cook school. That's interesting.*

Alice Brown: I'm not sure whether I picked it or whether I—but that's where I went, and so from there I went to Camp Polk, Louisiana, and—okay—and Victoria, Texas and then Big Spring, Texas.

Interviewer: *And Louisiana is where they taught you to cook for large numbers of people, right?*

Alice Brown: Yeah. Well, no, just for—we didn't cook for anybody but the WACs.

Interviewer: *Right.*

Alice Brown: But—yeah—and that was in—and Camp Polk was [laughter]—it was fun because they had the WACs—they had a big armored division up here in Camp Polk and then the WACs, they had back behind a gated, of course, and they had a separate little thing. And when we arrived there about the second—about the first evening after we had just arrived by train—about four days on the train—but we saw all these half-tracks, and all kinds of Army vehicles came in. They were having a dance and they came down to pick up WACs to come up to the dance.

Interviewer: *How about that.*

Alice Brown: So it was—that was rather fun.

Interviewer: *That sounds like fun.*

Alice Brown: And then from there we went to Big Springs, Texas and that's when they—it was long enough, so they were checking over my records and they decided that she had too much education to be in the mess hall. So I was—from there on, I was a file clerk, which of course takes [laughter]—you spread papers around.

Interviewer: *It's less creative than a cook's work, isn't it?*

Alice Brown: But from the viewpoint of—the far viewpoint from the people that were making the decisions.

Interviewer: *But then you went to work for the Adjutant General in England.*

Alice Brown: Well, it was—yeah, I was working in the Adjutant General's office, but I was still just filing papers, spreading them around. And—well, I could tell a good story about—well, went to Fort Benning, Georgia for overseas training. And then I don't know whether I told you some of the—one of the stories I have about the crossing. And they had a—it was—had been a cruise ship that they were—that they took over during the war for a troop carrier, and all the women were on the—housed on the upper deck and they had men on all the lower decks. And the men were allowed on—well, the top deck was smaller than the other decks, and they were allowed up there for their—and they caught them, notes being thrown up and down.

Interviewer: *How funny.*

Alice Brown: And they [warned], “[clears throat] If it doesn't stop, you will not be allowed on deck anymore!”

Interviewer: *[laughter]*

Alice Brown: But the biggest thing about—well, one of the things about the journey over was when we hit the—when we hit it so rough that the officers had—what had been the dance floor was their area, and the enlisted people were around the edges where they had rugs, you know, for sitting around the edges of the dance floor. And the day we hit the rough water, it was so rough that we were sitting a little bit close to the ropes that roped us off from the officers' territory, but when the ship went like this, why, we went over the ropes. [laughter]

Interviewer: *Ooh. [laughter]*

Alice Brown: There was always hope. [laughter]

Interviewer: *I bet that was an experience.*

Alice Brown: But you learned to enjoy different things.

Interviewer: *How long did it take?*

Alice Brown: I would say—I can't really remember, but I think it was about five days.

Interviewer: *That's pretty fast.*

Alice Brown: Well, it was a cruise ship, it was a—I don't think it was a week, but maybe it was.

Interviewer: *And then you arrived during the invasion of Normandy.*

Alice Brown: But we landed in Scotland, up in Scotland, on the day that they were having D-Day.

Interviewer: *Wow, that's amazing.*

Alice Brown: We didn't land anywhere near that, but it happened to be on the same day.

Interviewer: *How about that.*

Alice Brown: And we were stationed in Burtonwood, England, which is close to the border of Scotland. It's in northern England because we used to go to Scotland on—when we had days off

on leave. We went to Scotland. Loch Lomond, I got to know pretty well; went there several times.

Interviewer: *That's neat. Scotland is beautiful. Where else did you get to go while you were over there?*

Alice Brown: Well, that's the only place I was stationed during the war and after the war we had to [laughter]—well, we went to St. Germain, France, which is just off of Paris, and the train went into—the train went through that into Paris and it was about, as I remember, about a forty-five minute ride in there and the USO had quarters in the Eiffel Tower.

Interviewer: *Oh, wow.*

Alice Brown: On the second floor of the Eiffel Tower is where the USO had their thing, so we'd go in there almost every night. We were only there for a few weeks, and I'm not sure how long, but a few weeks and then a couple weeks in Wiesbaden, Germany, which is—from there they sent us home. After—it was after the war was over.

Interviewer: *What was it like in Wiesbaden at that time?*

Alice Brown: Well, we were just there for a day or two I think. And I've been back there since.

Interviewer: *Did they suffer at all during the war or because of the war?*

Alice Brown: I have no idea.

Interviewer: *You didn't see anything in particular?*

Alice Brown: No, we didn't see anything because we were just there for a short time and it was just a place they picked for us to be discharged.

Interviewer: *What did you have to eat while you were in England? Did you have normal English food or Scottish food or what did they feed you?*

Alice Brown: Oh, no. They shipped food over and—but we would go out to restaurants, and we went to one restaurant which—it was, well, it was a nice restaurant. But we heard them—this was during the war and we heard them telling the natives, the English people that were there, that—they asked, “What did they have tonight?” They had, oh, hamburger or baloney or something like that, and so when they came to our table and we said we hear you just have hamburger and baloney. “Oh, no, would you like a T-bone steak?” The Army was feeding us, and we had plenty of food and the English people did not have—they were rationed and didn’t have enough food really. But they were saving these steaks and the expensive food for the American Army who were well fed anyway, but they could charge them more.

Interviewer: *Oh, of course. That’s interesting.*

Alice Brown: But that’s—I shouldn’t have formed my opinion of the English people from that, but it influenced it a lot. [laughter]

Interviewer: *[laughter] Did you get along okay with the English people while you were over there, or did they resent the Army?*

Alice Brown: Oh, they all—they were—oh, we sort of picked up that they were—most of them were rather class conscious and so forth, and as far as they were concerned they didn’t—they treated us well for several reasons, because we were helping them, but also because they could make money from us.

Interviewer: *Sure. Do you still have your WAC uniform?*

Alice Brown: No, I don’t think so. I think I gave it to the museum.

Interviewer: *Oh, that’s nice.*

Alice Brown: Since I started volunteering there I gave them anything they wanted me to.

Interviewer: *Did the Army provide you with the uniform or did you have to purchase it yourself?*

Alice Brown: No, they provided us with it.

Interviewer: *How many uniforms did you have?*

Alice Brown: We must have had a couple because they had to be cleaned and so forth.

Interviewer: *And you had different clothes for different purposes probably.*

Alice Brown: Not too much.

Interviewer: *Can you remember any funny incidents that happened between you and your bunk mates or with the superior officers?*

Alice Brown: No, we got along pretty well, all of us were—I didn't—well, when I was in high school and so forth, maybe because I lived a little out of town or maybe—or probably for other reasons—but I didn't date much or didn't go out much at all. I did in the Army. In fact, when I back after I got discharged, I stayed at home partially because I had been writing to a fellow that I met down in Texas and even went up to where he lived in Detroit after I got back once. But we didn't reconnect. I mean we'd been friends when I was down there, but—when we were in the same place, but we didn't reconnect. But it was partially, I think, for that reason that I went back to work at Cleveland Heights, which was close to home and so forth.

Interviewer: *And you were working as a librarian?*

Alice Brown: Yes, children's librarian. And that was—I didn't stay there but one year.

Interviewer: *You were telling me a funny story about your boss the other day.*

Alice Brown: Yes, she was very much for—well, she would have done well in England. [laughter] She was very status conscious and the clerks, the people that did not have library degrees, were not allowed out from behind the desk. They stayed behind the desk, and she would—I worked

evenings sometimes and she would call the librarian that was on duty that night, that evening, into her office for a conference and that left the clerks behind the desk. They weren't allowed out from behind the desk; if anybody wanted to find something and couldn't find it themselves—

Interviewer: *They were out of luck.*

Alice Brown: Yeah! And it was, well, the library was—the stacks and the closed sections were—like any library has some closed sections for offices, and the people would wander around and through the back hallway, they went around the offices looking for somebody to help them. And I would be in the Children's Room and they had to go around through those offices to get to the Children's Room. And then the other thing was that she thought I should—I was staying in a place that some organization had for women who were working who weren't living at home and they had a place where—fixed up for women who work, and she didn't think that was a proper place for me to stay. She thought I ought to stay—rent an apartment in the building she was in where the rent was more than she paid me in salary for a month. [laughter]

Interviewer: *[laughter]*

Alice Brown: Oh, well.

Interviewer: *Not the best manager of all time, right? [laughter]*

Alice Brown: So that's why I decided to leave that library and somebody else from around there had gone out to Tacoma, Washington. So I went across the country from Ohio to Tacoma, Washington. But Tacoma and Seattle, Washington, have some of the best libraries in the country, I think. So I was very happy there. Plus, well, I also managed to pick up a husband there.

Interviewer: *Tell us the story of how you met.*

Alice Brown: Well, both he and I had friends who were in—going to the Mountaineers, which was like the Sierra Club, a group of people who went out in the outdoors, spent time in the outdoors. And both of us had friends that talked us into going even though—although I wasn't—I had grown up going out in those places, but not where there were mountains and things like that. And so we met there and wound up getting married.

Interviewer: *And then you had a couple sons.*

Alice Brown: Yeah. My two sons were born there, in Tacoma. And then I'm not sure why he decided to move. He was a chemist and he worked for the smelting and refining company there and he had grown up in Colorado Springs—Denver, I mean, not Colorado Springs, in Denver, Colorado. And I'm not sure why he went to Washington, but anyway for some reason I guess he decided he wanted to move out of that area, so he got a job down at the manganese mine down here. He was a chemist. And so we moved down here with our two boys.

Interviewer: *When you moved here, you were living in company housing, isn't that right?*

Alice Brown: Well, yes. I don't know how well known it is, but the houses on the north side of Lake Mead, north of Lake Mead and east of Boulder Highway, the houses there where the streets are named for shrubs, were all owned by the manganese mine and they were lived in by the salaried employees of Manganese. That means not the gophers and the hourly workers but the salaried employees. So, when he—when Jordan decided to leave Manganese, we had to move—we moved just across the—across Lake Mead Parkway to where the alphabetical trees are and lived on Beech Street, and I've lived there ever since.

Interviewer: *In that same house.*

Alice Brown: Yeah.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Alice Brown: We added onto it. After we—after the girls were born and there were three bedrooms and one of them was very small and so it got a little bit crowded for—okay, you have two boys in one bedroom and two girls in the other but, well, one bedroom was not as big as this room.

Interviewer: *[laughter] That's, yeah, that's—this is a pretty big room but, that's—I'm sure it was small back then, yeah.*

Alice Brown: But to have a—well, I think it maybe the boys were in bunk beds in there.

Interviewer: *When was the house built?*

Alice Brown: All those houses were built at the same time, and if you ever drive around there, you wouldn't believe it now, but they were exactly the same. They were turned different. They would turn them—every other one they would turn a different way, but they were originally all exactly the same with three bedrooms and a living room—three bedrooms, a bathroom, a living room, and a kitchen.

Interviewer: *Was that war-time housing?*

Alice Brown: No, no.

Interviewer: *Was it post-war?*

Alice Brown: It was— yeah, it was post-war I think. But, so we added on another, well a family room and another bathroom and another bedroom. And we did something that the, in the original, in the kitchen there was a big square window, and instead of walling all that up, we left that. So in the kitchen we had this big window that was open to the family room which was—it

was very enjoyable. But all the houses now have—practically all of them have had additions of some kind. Some of them have had second floors and so on.

Interviewer: *Oh, wow.*

Alice Brown: Just been built on, but if you drive around that neighborhood, it's—if you keep in mind that all those houses were originally the same—and you would never dream it, driving up and down the streets now.