

Lillian Rakestraw

(I'm just going to set it on. We'll start out – you give me the name, the date you were born – we'll start from the very beginning.)

I was born July 12, 1902, in Salem, or in Northville Township. I lived most of my life in Northville. ... in South Lyon – you see, this is Lyon Township right here. And I went to rural schools except from the eight grade on.

(O.K. – we're all set to go again. We started out with when you were born, and what was your maiden name?) Lyke

(How many were in your family?) Oh, there were just my two brothers and myself. We lived on a farm all our lives and enjoyed the outdoors. Then, when I went to high school, I drove about 4 miles for the first three years. (Northville?) South Lyon – I graduated from South Lyon, and a neighbor girl and I took turns driving, and the police ... that drove along the road. Then, the third year my folks bought this farm here. (Where is here?) This corner here. (At Eight Mile and -) Napier. And I wanted to finish in South Lyon, so Dad had an old buddy of his, a schoolmate, and his wife was teacher, and they wanted us girls to come there, and we were to help with the housework and go to school. Well, we did that the rest of that year, and then the next year, Mrs. Jones' mother, the lady we'd been staying with, lived along, and quite elderly, and so we stayed with her and went to school.

(How many were in your class in South Lyon?)

Well, we started out with 35, but when we graduated we had fifteen – twelve girls and three boys. There are six of us left.

(When you had gone earlier to school, you probably went close-by there?)

One room schools. Over the Seven Mile Road, and when the old stone school house that was on the corner of Ten Mile and Napier. That was torn down years ago, and another one put in there – a wooden one. And when I went to the eighth grade in Northville, that's the only time I went to Northville schools - Street in Northville.They'd race horses up and down Main Street sometimes.

(You'd go in with your family to shop, would you, or visit?)

Yes, very, quite often. I remember one year when we were living over, out near, Seven Mile – it's off Seven Mile. It was April, and it was about in the middle of April, and it snowed terrible hard. And we had to go down to the grist so my dad hitched he team onto the sleigh and went down. Well, Seven Mile Road wasn't paved then, of course. So we got down there alright, but when we had to come home, the snow was gone, and I can still hear those runners grating on the gravel. We made it.

(After high school, what did you do?)

I taught – I went to summer school, and then I taught one year down here in the Baseline School and (You say summer school – where would that have been?) Down there at Northwestern, the corner of let's see what it – Michigan Avenue (actual location is Grand River and the Boulevard) and the Boulevard I think it was. (Oh, you went to Detroit to live?) Yes, well I stayed with the man that owned this farm over here with his son. Wanted to come out here and work, so his wife was alone. So I'd stay with her during the week, then he'd be home over the weekend. And that's where I boarded there six weeks. And after I finished teaching that year, I went back to Ypsi Normal School, as they called it then, and spent well it was a little better than – it wasn't quite four years because I had gone to two summer schools to make up that other semester. And I came back, and I heard there was a teacher in Northville that was going to have to quit, and so I went down and I asked about it. And they said "well yes," and I could go in there the first of April and finish the year. And I thought that was quite wonderful. But it was more wonderful when he told me "But if we hire you for that, you will have to sign up for the next year." Nothing could have pleased me more because I was afraid I – teachers were plentiful then. (That was at the Baseline School?) No, it was at the Northville School – it was an overflow room, they called it of the second and third grade. I think. And I can't remember how many of the people – Maryann Spagnuolo that just died was one of the children that was in the room, and Charles Carrington, and oh, I can't think of I taught there just one year – no, I taught there four years, and I went to Plymouth then, where I taught two years. But then they wouldn't let a teacher get married and go on back, so Mr. Smith, my superintendent tried his best to get me to give up my marriage and stay. But I thought too much of the man, so I had to quit. And then, well I didn't do anything but substitute for a while. And finally, there was a little school down east of Northville there on Seven Mile Road is the – there's a building there now, a house of some kind. And they were without a teacher, so I went down there. I taught there for three years. The last year I taught there, I got \$50 a month, and they paid me – it was during the Depression – they would pay me the school tax as it came in. And one time I got \$1.67.

And then we lived right across the road there then, and I went up the Wash Oak School – the school that you have in the museum down there. I taught a year. (Tell me a little more about that.) Well, it was very exciting, except we had the most exciting thing happen about the second week of school, the house burned. And we moved in with the Holts(?) that lived over here, and it was January before we got a little – this little house in here we built onto it. But while I was there, we had – I had quite a good-sized school. And I remember (Tell me some of the things you would do in the one-room school as teacher – your responsibilities – how many children did you have-) I had – I taught in the late 20's, well, I can't remember exactly. It was my job to get there in the morning and see if the fire was burning. I usually had the boys usually carried in the wood for me – the wood house was right on the back of the schoolhouse. And I would sweep the floor – the floor doesn't look like now like it did then because then it was just a plain wood floor and dust all the time. And then we had our regular classes. I was trying to think of some of the people that was there that you'd know, but I had four of my cousins, but their father was very strict with them, and he told them they must never call me by my first name. They must call me Mrs. Rakestraw, and they did. Not once did they make a mistake. And one day, one of 'em – one of those boys- sneaked around the schoolhouse and came in and told me that Dean Hofsinger (?) had brought some dynamite caps to school; and they had a great big stone out there by the corner of the yard next to the road. And all those kids ran around that stone, and he was

pounding them with another stone trying to make 'em go off. Well, when Orvil told me that, I went outside – I just flew – because I thought they'd goof, and somebody would lose a – hit their eyes before I got out there, but come to find out, I made Dean go – give me all the caps, and then I stopped off at home and told his father about it. And he kind of laughed and said, "Well, those caps, kind of caps won't go off." And that was a good thing I guess. (Was it all eight grades?) Yes, I had an eighth grade – I think there were four in it, three or four. They went to Northville the next year.

(Have you been in the old school since they moved the Wash Oak School?) Yes. (Does it look any much the same?) No, it doesn't look anything the same now. Different kinds of seats – they have the old fashioned double seats, you see, way back. And that floor being so much darker. And of course we had a different kind of a teacher's desk. (What would it be like?) The teacher's desk – it looked like more or less like a small table, and usually they had a back on 'em just about three or four inches high, so your ink bottle wouldn't go overboard, and you could pile your books up there, you know....they wouldn't slip off. (Was the stove in the middle of the room?) To the back – they usually had them to the back, and the only trouble is that so many times the stove pipe would go the whole length of the room. And I remember one time it fell down at one school. We had to take a half-day off when we had the stove pipe problem. But a lot of those people moved from place to place – they wouldn't be around here too much. So – they were all pretty good – there was none of them that were mean or did mean things, anything like that. I never had to waylay any of 'em that they tell about.

(How did you happen to get into teaching?)

I liked it, and that was – my mother used to laugh at me. She said that I should make a good teacher. I started out with wooden heads because I'd take – I'd go out in the wood shed and there was one end of it – in bad weather, I had a playhouse. And I'd take these sticks that were shaped like a "Y" and pretend those two sticks that was their legs, and I'd go to the rag bag and I'd dress 'em up, and I'd have them sitting around in there and play school in there. Of course my brothers didn't appreciate that game so much. But that's why my mother said that – I started out with wooden heads or blockheads, I suppose.

(Well, you taught in Northville, in Plymouth, Wash Oak....)

Well, that's where I taught longest – twenty years, the last twenty years I taught. I retired there in '67.

(Was it elementary you were teaching?)

Well, I taught everything – mostly elementary and junior high.

(....for a good many years?)

Yes, I loved every bit of it. I was – those children seemed just like mine. But I think in the Fall, along about October, I'd think well I won't get another bunch as nice as this bunch another year. And the next year I felt the same thing when I got to.... I always enjoyed them.

(Are there some things that stand out in your memory, especially fond – you’ve mentioned about the dynamite caps – that was kind of exciting.)

Well, I think that’s probably the worst thing that ever happened in my career.

(Did you have Christmas programs?)

In the rural schools, but not when I was in town....

(Tell me about the Christmas programs.)

Well, most all the children had a piece to speak, of course. And then there was some dialogues. Sometimes we’d have one or two children that would have some special talent that they could take part. And they’d stand up there according to their height – about three rows of them – and sing songs. And of course, I can’t sing a note. My father used to wonder how I taught those children to sing those songs and get the right tune. I told you..... Well, if I hadn’t known the notes and been able to sound them on the piano or --- When I was going to school, I sang so well that one teacher told me just to say the words and not sing. I’ve never been able to sing. And when we had bad weather in the rural schools, why earlier of course in my day and age, it was usually a buggy or sleigh that took us to school in. And then later years, why they – parents would bring them in horse and buggies and finally, automobiles. And clothes drying all over the school house usually – the rural schools. I had, in South Lyon I had some children one year – we had been studying about the (?) schools in India, where they take a hold hands, you know, and the teacher tells them something, and they all repeat it together. That’s the way to learn it, and sway back and forth. We’d just been studying about that in geography, I guess it was, and had this one boy, and he just – school had just started, we hadn’t been there very long – and he just talked out loud all the time, and I just couldn’t take it. Rather than a strapping, why I turned to him, and I says, “Where did you go to school last year?” And he looked up at me, disgusted to think I didn’t know and said “Why, Munson (?) of course.” I says, “well, you could have fooled me. I thought you went to (?) school.” Well, of course, the children all giggled – they just giggled for an instant. But you know I never had to speak to him again about talking out loud. I always said I could think of worse things that whippin’ ‘em.

(Well, what was the discipline?) How did you control, especially ninth grade boys in a rural school?)

I don’t – I didn’t have any trouble with ‘em. I had a fifth grader – that was about the third day I taught school. He refused to do his arithmetic. And I said, “Now, Edward you can stay after school, and we’ll get that arithmetic.” Well, he wasn’t going to stay, but I made sure he was inside, and then I locked the door because I thought he’d go away from me. And I went down – there were double seats, and I sat down in the seat with him and I said, “Get out your arithmetic book.” And he did – slammed it up on the desk. I opened it to where the lesson was that he was to do, and he swore at me. Well, I got up out of the seat, and I took him out of it and took him across my knee and gave him a couple, three slaps in the proper place, and sit him back down, and he sit there and he went to work on that problems, and he knew just as well how to do them as I did, come to find out. And after we got the arithmetic done, I let him go, and said goodnight

to him and everything and unlocked the door so he could get out. But that... marks in my registry, and I heard somebody in the hall. I thought oh, oh, what did he do – go and get a baseball bat or something. I got up and went to the door to see what it was. And there was an old teacher's desk out there with a lot of chairs he had all piled up. Well, I said, "Edward, what are you trying to do?" Well, I'm trying to get up in the attic to fix that bell rope that's broken." And he got the bell rope fixed. I held the chairs for him then. And he walked home with me. That little house was down the road here. Of course it's gone now. And so is he. No, I didn't like doing it, but that was my third day of school....

(You've seen a change in the wages quite a bit, haven't you?)

Oh yes, I taught in the school down east of town for \$50, and when I taught up here in the Wash Oak School, I taught for \$50 a month. But those were the only times I taught (?) I never did get up to \$7,000. The next year I think I would've if I'd taught another year. I could've taught another year. Mr. Bartlett wanted me to and said then we retire together, we could – he was about a year younger than I was. But I retired in June before I was 65, you see, and I'd been 65 the whole next year, so I could've taught another year, but my husband's health was so bad. When I went into the school down here, we didn't have any library. The library money had been used for other purposes.

(This was the one on Eight Mile?)

Yes, so I had a box social, and we raised money that way. I don't remember how much. And I bought some books. And then we didn't have any dictionary, and I had a big dictionary at home – I'd taken that down there. No encyclopedias, so when the book money came, I invested it in a set of encyclopedias, which I wasn't supposed to I found out afterwards. But we had to use the rest of the book money for a year to pay for those encyclopedias. But I felt they needed those more than they did the library books. But that's when the library got started. That is one of the library...one of the book cases they had.working in Northville to take it down to the dump, and he thought too much of that. He liked to refinish things anyway.

(You mention the box social. Tell me what a box social is.)

Well, the women and the girls take up – fix a social or a lunch, and they put it in a box, and the napkins and they have sandwiches, cake, cookies, and fruit, and things like that. And then they take it, then they take them, and they fix 'em up to look pretty fancy on the outside. Then they – someone who's good at it, auctioneers them off. They go to the highest bidder, and sometimes if there's a pretty girl, they run 'em a little bit. And the money then was used for goes – there's no guide restrictions - you can use all of it for what you want to.

(It wasn't an annual event? It was just....)

Oh no, I just had it that Fall. There was another teacher there next year. Former classmate of mine.

(Was Mr. Rakestraw a local person, too?)

No, he moved here, but he was born in Brookston, Indiana, the very southern part of Indiana. And he spent a whole – spent four years in the Marines. So, his mother didn't stay in one place very long.

(Course, he lived right here a good long time.)

Yes, he lived the rest of his life here. He always liked his home.

(Are there some things about Northville, the town that you would go to, activities that you'd enjoy?)

You mean then? (Yes, way back.) Well, we always had "doings" as we called it. The holidays – of course, there'd be horse racing, ball games, things like that. And sometimes, they'd have doings on the street, and the band played. Northville's band could always be heard because we had one of those – we called it a crow's nest – up on the four corners there. And they were up in that -and in the evening they'd have a street dance.

(Who would play for that – the band would play for that?)

Northville had a band, and I don't remember.....

(What kind of dances would they do?)

They used to waltz and the foxtrot and some of the one step some of those old timers- the two step. The country waltz is the one they did most.

(And would you go in, say in your courting days?)

I don't know that was – I guess I was too young. We didn't go down at night much. No, I didn't dance – I never danced – I just stood and watched 'em.

(Teaching was – had been a big part of your life.)

Oh, yes. (How many years – total, did you say?) 39. I started in substituting after I retired, and it was almost steady teaching. But as I say, my husband's health was so bad, he wanted me right here all the time. So I felt that was my place. You know. I loved teaching, and I've had wonderful experiences with the people coming back and the different things they've told me and said. You know, it made me feel good. The funny part – some of the worst boys are the ones that came back to see me. Everybody else said were the worst boys, I didn't think they were bad. They were alright as far as I was concerned.

(It was quite something to be going – to go college too in those days?)

Yes, I saved that money, and the folks didn't charge me any board or anything of course. And I saved all my wages, and I didn't have quite enough to finish. And so they signed a note for me at the bank.....I knew when it was due. I went in there. Mr. Babbitt, knew who I was, and he

didn't even ask me for the signer. Got my money without the signer. Of course, later on my brother worked there in the bank – Harry. But they had five people in that bank then. (The name of that bank?) It was Babbitt – oh, we called it Babbitt's Bank. It's where Manufacturers Bank is now. And Mr. Babbitt and – oh, I can't remember that man...now – and Harry Lyke, and there was a girl that – the Blumberg(?) girl that was sort of a bookkeeper, I guess. I don't know what else you'd call her. And Mr. Wilbur was one of the men and Harold Bloom (?) – four men and one girl. He was working there when the bank closed that time, and everybody's money was tied up. And he said elderly people would come in and just cry because they put their money in there for their pension and having it to live on when there was no aid for them like it is today. And he said, "Oh," he says, "I can hardly stand it." And when he got ready, when they opened up again, they wanted him to come back. He says, "all I can think of is those elderly people crying – I can't go back. He went to Ford's to work. Of course, he worked in the office there.

(It was hard living in the Depression.)

Yes, it was. Lyle(?) couldn't get work, so that's when I went back to teaching school. He got wood, so we had something to burn. My daughter, Ruth(?), grew up and took over the job of teaching. Somebody says to me when are you gonna quite teaching school. I says when I get somebody to take my place.

(How many children?)

Just the one. She taught 27 years herself. But when they fixed it so they could retire earlier here a couple of years ago – her husband is a sheriff, and he wanted to – he works nights a lot, and he kinda wanted her to stay home – to work at home. So she quit. But she teaches schools – entertain herself – some schools.

(Does she live around here?)

.....Charlotte. Things like that leave me.

(Well, a lot of interesting memories you can reflect upon.)

Yes, I sit here, and many times I'm not reading or anything. I just live my life over again. Well, I was fortunate. We didn't have a whole lot of family troubles, and everything was plenty(?). One summer one of my classmates graduated with me. I took a trip with her out west – down to Colorado, then up toshe's hobbling around with a cane too. I think we were one of the first – the radio we got – we lived over here. (?) lived down the road farther, and Dad was so tickled with it, you know, and he asked them to hear it, and this fellow, he was uneducated anyway. He says, "You can't fool me," he says. "You've got something, a phonograph or something just outside the door there playing it." And he insisted that that wasn't coming from over the air. He knew better than that.

(You've seen a lot of changes then.)

I'm not sure they're all for the best. I enjoyed those old days. The neighborhood we lived in when I was growing up over north here – up along Ten Mile Road, there was a lot of them – people that hadn't gone to school. They hadn't moved away; they just taken over their parents' farm when they died. So they had a party every Saturday night, and we kids were usually given an empty room someplace to play games in. And none of 'em played cards. They worked puzzles. And then there's one fella.....or whatever you want to call it. And they'd do a little (?) or things like that. But it was good – everyone had a good time. Nobody thought about –we didn't say anything mean, you know. They were all good neighbors. I don't think anyone of them families represented over there on that road any more.

(Thank you, Mrs. Rakestraw.)