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**ORAL HISTORY NARRATIVES MUSCATATUCK STATE DEVELOPMENTAL CENTER WITH
BELMA EBERTS
NOVEMBER 3, 2004
INTERVIEWER: JANE HARLAN-SIMMONS
RECORD ID: 148-DO**

BE: BELMA EBERTS

JHS: JANE HARLAN-SIMMONS

[TITLE]

[00:00:12]

JHS: I'm talking to Belma Eberts in North Vernon, Indiana. My name is Jane Harlan-Simmons. How long have you lived in North Vernon?

BE: Well my daddy was a railroader and so we lived in North Vernon two or three times. I started to school in North Vernon and then we moved to Cincinnati and then we moved to Seymour and then I came back here and finished the last two years of school here. And then I married here and that settled me down. In fact I moved into this apartment and I moved out of the house that I'd lived in for 56 years. Jack and I built the house and lived there. Even before we started to school we used to go to Muscatatuck. My daddy played baseball. He was a pitcher and a real good friend, a family friend, he was the catcher. Mother and his wife would pack a lunch and we'd have a picnic after the ball game and they played ball to entertain the patients out there. The patients were always interested in talking to the kids in the group because we'd tell them all kinds of stories. We'd just tell them things they'd ask us.

JHS: What kind of things did they want to know?

BE: I don't really remember, since I was as young as I was. I was probably 5 years old, 4 or 5. Then when I came back here I didn't have much, well, yes, we used to go to the, they had a dance out there every, I forget when it was. On one floor they round danced and another floor they square danced. We always managed to go watch them square dance and Perk got in the square dance one time and he didn't know any more about square dancing than . . .

[00:02:41]

JHS: Now, is he older or younger?

[00:02:43]

BE: He's a year younger than me.

JHS: So he was pretty young at that time.

BE: Well, we had come back to town, see.

JHS: You left when you were around 5?

BE: Well, I think I was in the first grade of school, had just finished first grade when we left here and then we didn't come back here until I was a junior in high school and then's when we, well even after we were out of high school as a married couples we'd go out to that dance every year and it was always fun.

JHS: What's your first memory of Muscatatuck? Was it when you were 5 at the baseball games?

BE: The baseball games, um-huh. And mother and daddy had pictures that were taken and I remember seeing the pictures that they had. I think Perk ended up with all the pictures. But that's the very first memory. Well then after we came back here and I married, Jack and I had a son, about 13 months after we were married or two years or something, anyway, Jack liked to fish. So we'd go out there and there was a good place to fish in a stream out there and he'd park down there and I'd tie his seat to the bumper of the car so he wouldn't fall in the river. Then more of the patients would come and want to know why I had that boy tied to that car. One guy, his first name was Emerson, and I can't think of his last name, but he picked blackberries and sent word to me to come and get the blackberries. I wouldn't have walked the street for blackberries but I got his blackberries because he had done it as a favor. I paid him something, I don't know, just a token of some sort for him.

[00:05:05]

JHS: He was a resident of Muscatatuck?

BE: Yes. In the meantime, I hired two girls from out there. One came to iron and she did all of my ironing the day that she was there, and then the other one came and cleaned my house.

JHS: How old do you think they were or were they different ages?

BE: They were probably about the same age and I would say they were maybe 25. They brought them to my house in a bus and then they picked them up at a certain time.

JHS: What was the rate that they were paid for ironing or cleaning?

BE: Oh, gosh, you know I don't remember.

JHS: It's been a little while.

BE: Yes, it's been a long while. That boy that I give the dickens to is 56 years old now. I can't tell you what I paid. I don't think it was very much.

[00:06:06]

JHS: Did it seem like you were getting your money's worth?

[00:06:10]

BE: I got my money's worth, yes. Considering the girls that were doing it, they did a good job. The girl that ironed, you know, the clothes looked real nice and the girl that cleaned did a good job too. I can't remember, I guess the girl that ironed came every week and probably the other girl came every week. But you know, I have no idea how much or even how I paid them, whether I sent money to the school or whether I gave them the money or what.

But I really, like I say, I can't tell you a whole lot. I remember going out there when they were self-sufficient and clear to the other end of the school, it was on the north side, I guess north, there was a house and some ladies in that and they had chickens and they were so happy taking care of their chickens and gathering the eggs and things like that. They milked cows and they had vegetable gardens and the whole place was pretty well self-sufficient. Then somebody came in and decided that that wasn't the way it ought to be done. Even though we lived here in town and we heard a lot of different things that went on out there, when you had no connection with it you didn't pay a lot of attention to it. After you called me the first time, I was trying to think, and I can't tell you, but I went out to the church out there and the chaplain, we were pretty good friends. I don't know why I volunteered and what I was doing. That's awful. My memory, I guess at 82, you can forget what you want to. Chambers was his name and he was always real glad and I can't remember. I asked Perk and I said, "Perk, why did I come out there?" And he said, "Well, I don't know." But he was over in the school at the time because I would go over to the school and see him once in a while when I'd be out there and then other times I wouldn't. But we went in the chapel for something. It wasn't, Chambers didn't preach, it wasn't for a church service of any sort. I just don't know what we did.

[00:09:21]

JHS: Did your family have any other connections because your brother working there?

BE: No. Mother never ever had any of them come to clean. Yeah, she could have, but she didn't have. Of course, daddy was gone on the railroad all the time so he didn't and then we had another brother who was 10 years younger than Perk. Perk and I are a year apart and then there's 10 years between the next two. And he married a Texan and they came home their first Christmas and they went out to see Perk and they saw a little girl and Perk could tell you more about that I can. Jo Jo is what we called her. They brought her home and we all had a Christmas for her. She was kind of a, she was dwarfish-like and she was a cute little thing. My sister-in-law fell in love with her. We didn't have her, I don't think we had her on Christmas day but we had her during the Christmas holidays off and on and we all got gifts and things for her. As I remember Joe and Myrtle bought her a little rocking chair and she was so pleased with that little rocking chair. That's the only time that he had anything to do with them because as soon as he got out of high school he went to college and then went into the Air Force. He wasn't around North Vernon that much.

JHS: And none of your children had worked there?

[00:11:18]

BE: No. My two boys went to Cummins and the two girls just didn't work anyplace.

[00:11:30]

JHS: What was your impression of how Muscatatuck was viewed in the North Vernon community? I'm sure that changed over time.

BE: Yeah. Well, now when we were young and we'd go out to the ball games we thought that was just wonderful that they had a place to stay and that they were taken care of like they were. And then time come along and you hear stories about how mean someone was to them and you felt sorry for them then because they hurt them. Some of them were hurt. And then they would change administrators and each administrator had an entirely different idea, like the one decided that they shouldn't be self-sufficient so he changed all that. That just broke those old ladies' hearts. They were just sick because they had to give up their chickens. Some of the administrators were well liked around town and every once in a while they'd get one out there that the people around town didn't care a whole lot for but it was his ideas of how he ran the place. I know that Butlerville or Muscatatuck put a lot of money in North Vernon because a lot of people worked out there that brought their paychecks home from there. It was a good thing for our surroundings here because they helped; they put bread and butter on people's tables.

JHS: How were the people that worked there viewed by the rest of you that didn't work there?

[00:13:47]

BE: Well, it was a job for them and we knew they had to have a job. My son-in-law's mother worked in the dietary department. My daughter-in-law's mother worked in the dietary department. In fact, her dad was the fireman out there when my son met her. He ran the fire department. Then the mother worked, she started out in the laundry I think but she ended up in the dietary department. I knew a couple of other ladies that worked in the dietary department. I didn't know many people that were caretakers. I don't know why but I just didn't know them.

JHS: What was it like in high school? Did the kids talk about Muscatatuck at all?

BE: No. We were too busy thinking of something else to do. No. If someone's parents worked out there they may have said something about it but we were not, it seemed like it was a far away place, as far as my group of friends were concerned, because there was no connection.

JHS: It was another world.

[00:15:27]

BE: Yeah. My friends were either their parents were railroaders or merchants here in town. The guy I married, they had the ice plant and they had a coal yard and so they had no connection. But my father-in-law was on the water board here in North Vernon and he and Joe McAullif and Johnnie Shires, the three of them were on the water board and they, I can remember him sitting there in the office behind the door at a drawing table. They were the ones that were the reason they got the reservoir out there. North Vernon, that's one thing people did talk about. The creek or the river ran from there on down here and it would dry up completely. Jack, himself, got on a tractor and cleaned out the potholes to make the water run on down so North Vernon would have a little bit of water. And then Grandpa and Johnnie and Joe got the idea of getting a reservoir and that was where they picked the place to have it. I guess it's broken now though. There's something wrong with it. We still have water from there but not, the dam's broken or something.

[00:17:27]

JHS: So the reservoir is on the Muscatatuck grounds?

BE: Um-huh. And it brought, they'd let the water down and we've had continual flow of water ever since that but up until then in the summer time we were hard up for water. I never will forget. That oldest boy of ours, his grandpa was on the water board so all we heard was 'conserve water, conserve water' and one day he was in the bathroom and had the water running. And I said, "E.C., are you running that water?" "Yes." And I said, "Now you know there's a shortage." There was dead silence for a minute and then he said, "Hot water too?" I guess he was going to turn the hot water on.

JHS: He thought that came from a different place.

BE: I guess he did. Yeah, Grandpa worked hard to get that reservoir going, he and Johnnie and that was a big thing for North Vernon. It helped bring in businesses because businesses wouldn't come here because it wouldn't have any water.

JHS: And what was the economic arrangement with Muscatatuck, did they pay anything for the water?

[00:18:57]

BE: I don't think so. I think it was all a state thing. I really don't know. I just remember Grandpa working on it and I remember us being short of water. But I had 3 kids and I had other things to keep me occupied. I didn't pay much attention to that part. But the reservoir is out there and it's connected to this little stream where we used to fish. I went out fishing, Jack had a fishing buddy. He and his wife and Jack and I would go out and one day I caught the biggest crappie that anybody had ever caught and Jack never took me fishing any more. I always told everybody that it was because I caught the biggest fish. I wasn't allowed to go fishing any more. Really, if I had wanted to, I would have gone fishing. I don't know who you could ask about the money situation between, I know they used to have a terrible, terrible saying. I guess I won't say it with this thing on. They used to say, "North Vernon's out of water", and they called the nuts is what they called them, "So all you nuts pee all you can."

JHS: I was going to ask you like when the kids, you said they didn't talk about Muscatatuck very much but when they did talk about the people there, what kind of words did they use to describe them?

BE: Nearly everybody called them nuts.

JHS: And did that change over time?

BE: Yeah.

JHS: What did it change to?

BE: Residents or patients or whatever. The same as in the nursing home. You don't call them patients as much as you do a resident and that's the way.

[00:21:13]

JHS: Do you think when people called them nuts, did you think, did the idea people had that they were crazy?

[00:21:25]

BE: Yeah. They thought they were not bright. It was odd to a lot of people when they started letting them come to town and live. The lady that had the health food store downtown had a guy who's name was Claude. Claude came in and worked for her and I don't know whether she got him a room. We had an old hotel here and I think a lot of them stayed, the few that were hired here in town full time stayed maybe in that old hotel. Claude, he married another one from out there. I can't remember what her name was. And she did some housework I think for a few people to earn money. Claude and she had a family. I don't know. Claude has now died and I haven't seen her, of course I don't get out as much as I used to but I don't believe she's around here. She may have died too.

JHS: Was there much marriage between residents at Muscatatuck and people in this town?

BE: No. The marriage was the patients or the residents would marry one another and of course that's one thing they all talked about was their girlfriends. I mean they all had girlfriends and a boyfriend and they would get to see one another, well maybe at the chapel or maybe something was going on at the gym or things like that. Another thing we did, I forgot about, Jack and I square danced and we went out there. Our square dance club went out there two or three times and we square danced to show them about square dancing and then we square danced with them, the real simple steps. The caller was a real good friend of ours and he got so tickled one night he couldn't call for a few minutes. One of them come out with a twine string around his neck and his toothbrush tied to it. When he showed up I thought Johnnie was going to swallow the microphone.

[00:24:35]

JHS: How was that different when you went as a 4 or 5-year-old to events, was that a lot different than the dancing?

BE: We didn't go to any dances when, all we went to was ball games when we were little, 4 and 5 years old. I was married when we square danced. The only thing I remember as a kid was going out there and we were always excited because we knew we'd get to have a picnic. The bleachers were just full of the patients, the residents. As I remember, mother and Olive kind of kept us off to the side by the car because we were as little as we were. Olive's little girl was only about 3. They just kept us kind of off to the side. Then when the ball game was over, all the residents went on back because they didn't hang around while we were having our picnic or anything and mother and them spread a blanket on the ground and put the food out. We'd all sit on the ground and have a picnic.

JHS: You did say that the kids, the Muscatatuck patients, asked questions.

BE: Well, they'd come over. Actually, you know they talked mother and Olive more than they did to us. We were probably a little backward and maybe we'd say 'um-huh' or 'huh-un' or something to them, but we didn't talk to them very much.

[00:26:40]

JHS: How do you remember feeling about those kids? They must have been really different for you.

[00:26:46]

BE: Well it was but they didn't frighten me. And then when I took E.C. out there and tied him to the bumper I didn't mind the residents coming around and Jack would be down the river some place. I wasn't afraid of them. Maybe I should have been but I wasn't.

JHS: Were you curious?

BE: No, just tried to be friendly with them, you know. We talked about, well of course they wanted to know all these questions about why I had that kid tied to the car.

JHS: When you were 4 or 5 did you feel like they were really different from you? Were you conscious that there was a big difference?

BE: Yeah, yes. And I guess I realized why mother kept us kind of over to the side and closer to the car.

JHS: That you weren't one of them?

BE: Yeah, and of course we weren't interested in daddy's ball game at all. Daddy was a good pitcher but we didn't care. So we were just there for the fun of it and the picnic. That was the main thing we were there for.

[00:28:06]

JHS: I want to just go back to something you said about when the superintendents changed or the administration changed there, that some of them were like by the people in town and some weren't. Can you talk about that a little bit?

BE: Well, if they made big changes and were kind of hard on the patients then people around town didn't like them. There was one man that was out there that had a family and there were two nurses and there was talk about him being friendly with the two nurses, you know. People in town kind of looked for them to do something so they could talk about them sometimes and then other times, when I was in high school one of my very best friend's father was, I don't think it was the administrator because they lived in North Vernon but he must have been a doctor out there or something. Her parents were considerably older than my parents were so they always kind of frightened me. We'd spend the night with them once in a while but if we'd get too noisy they'd give us the dickens. Danny was his name. But, I'm trying to think, the one group the Perk with, there was lots of scandal about some of them. And Perk, I don't know if he was head of the social department or what, but Perk said he was one of the best guys that ever was but they crucified him.

JHS: Was this Mr. Sasser?

BE: Well, this man worked with Sasser and I can't think what his name was.

JHS: And he's the one that charges were brought up on?

[00:30:17]

BE: Um-huh.

[00:30:18]

JHS: And what did people in town think about that. Did they think he was guilty?

BE: Probably so. It was Copeland was the boy's name that they brought the charges up on. It wasn't Al Sasser, I don't believe. And Perk still swears that he was one of the finest guys that ever was but they brought these charges up. Now, were they still here when they brought those charges up against him or had they moved on to a different place? Do you know? I don't know.

JHS: From what I understand, that was why Al Sasser left, because of the scandal or the pressures. I wasn't sure how the townspeople viewed that or who this guy Copeland's victims were supposed to be.

BE: I don't know. They thought he may have been gay even. Back at that time they didn't think a whole lot about gay people but they thought he was different. I'll say it that way. Well then Perk and Al Sasser went to Glenwood, Iowa, I think. I believe Al went out there. Perk and Polly moved around so much I couldn't keep up with them. We went out to Glenwood two or three times to visit them.

JHS: What did people in town say about Al Sasser?

BE: Al was not really, I don't think Al was too well liked around town because he had, well too modern an idea and they wanted it to run as an old fashioned place. In fact, I think Al's the one that changed it and took the hens away from the old ladies and things like that. But I wouldn't swear to that. I don't remember, I wasn't in on it.

[00:32:4]

JHS: Do you remember any talk about the case, the criminal charges?

BE: No, I don't. My daughter-in-law could probably tell you a whole bunch about the place because she was raised out there on the grounds. She baby sat with several families who lived out there and as she grew older and was old enough to baby sit she took care of quite a few of the other residents. They lived in sort of a cul-de-sac and she took care of several of the kids. She mentions every once in a while about this one or that one and somebody will say something about them and she'll say, "I remember when he was just this high."

JHS: I'm not so worried about getting facts from about what happened but just if you have recollections of what people thought of the place and that kind of thing.

BE: Well Muscatatuck was always, in my way of thinking, people were skeptical about how the people ran it. And that's when, like I say, some would come in that were liked and some weren't liked. I don't know. I'm not much help to you I'm sure.

JHS: You mentioned the square dance groups that you were involved in. Were there any other community groups that you were either in or you knew of other people that had a relationship?

[00:34:53]

BE: That volunteered and went out there for different thing? Yes. And that's why I was at the chapel but I don't know what I was volunteering for. After you contacted me I kept thinking, now what was it that I went out to that chapel for? What did we do? Who did we go with? And it will not come back to me.

[00:35:17]

JHS: It may come back when you're not trying. Were there community organizations, like charitable groups or anything you remember being involved in?

BE: At Christmas a lot of people would go out and have maybe a party in one house or another. They usually tried to get the more high functional places to go and take, they'd take candy and cookies and visit with them and things like that. I only remember it at Christmas time. It wasn't a year round thing. Now I may be wrong. I didn't know everything that went on out there. I sure wish I could remember why I went to the chapel.

JHS: Now you were a homemaker during this time. You were not working outside the home?

BE: No. I didn't work outside the home for a long time. Jack was elected . . . We had two families. We had a boy 16, a girl 15, a boy 11 and then we had a baby. So I didn't work until she was, I think she was in school. And then Jack didn't want me to work so I stayed home. I was in Scouts. I don't remember taking my Scouts out there for anything though, Girl Scouts. For the life of me I cannot think why I went to the chapel or what we even did.

JHS: There are a lot more things we can talk about but our time is short. What is your feeling about the closure and what do you think other people in town feel about the closure?

[00:37:33]

BE: Well, I think everyone feels like it's taking a lot of income out of our town for one thing and they're just putting those kids most any place and that doesn't, that's not too fair either. Some of them are not able to be put just any place. I worked at McDonald's back 8, 9 years ago and parents would come in there with their children that lived at the school and I remember one boy. He was not, she was worried to death what she was going to do with him, where she was going to find a decent place because he'd start to eat and he's just keep going like this and then he'd yell out. He wasn't able to be out on his own or in another place. But I think the last time I talked to her she thought she had found a place up fairly close to where her home was and she'd be closer to him then. I think people really hated to see the place close, for more reasons than one. The income was one and the fact that they just dumped those kids out, it seemed like they just dumped them out. Maybe they studied it out and figured real good places for them. I don't know.

JHS: But you think the perception was that they weren't really being, their interest was being addressed?

[00:39:44]

BE: Not as much as they should have been. People just took it for granted. Muscatatuck was there and it was going to be there forever and those kids were going to be taken care of forever but all of a sudden they aren't.

END OF INTERVIEW