

Ruth Chase Noland

Interviewed by Julia Schwenn on September 13, 1982 at an unknown location.

Oral history tape number: 14

Mrs. Noland, could we talk about what it was like to be growing up in Madison in the early 1900s? Perhaps you could recount what you remember, starting with the circumstances of your coming to Madison.

I was born in Illinois and didn't come to Madison until much later.

About 1908, was it?

Yes, 1908 is when we moved to the Heights.

You had been in Madison earlier than that, in another place in Madison? Or did you come directly to the Heights?

No. My family came from New England and we came to the Heights, as you say, in about 1908. I was born in Chicago in 1895. One of the earliest recollections I have of the University Heights was the windmills. Every house, of the few that were there, had a windmill.

With a pump, I suppose.

They pumped the water with it. The artesian water. The water wasn't provided by the city.

No chlorine and fluoride.

No.

Good water.

I had forgotten all about the windmills until the other day. I woke up and I heard the windmills in my recollection. They all squeaked. There were perhaps only really a half a dozen at that time, but it was something that I recollected later.

And essential to your operation at the time.

Yes.

Where did the Chase... where was your home in University Heights?

Well, it was right up on top of the hill, at Summit and Prospect.

Opposite where the Parsons now live and maybe where that Keck home, the very modern home, is now. Yes, I see where that would be. Now no longer standing, your home.

Oh, yes.

Yes, I know then. Across the street. That would be on the south side.

Yes. When we came really to the Heights was in 1908.

Yes, 1908 is what I think you said earlier, in the Regent News.

Yes, that's right. It was 1908. We bought a piece of land up at the top of the hill and built our home there, that is, my parents did. What is now next door was the home for the family until... well, it continued to be until my parents died. In the meantime I was married and my father gave us the part of his garden. I've been in that neighborhood...

For ever and ever.

Almost. It seems that way.

You must have been about twelve or so when you came to Madison. Were you?

Yes. I was. I was thinking about the places and people. Gertrude Wilson, of course, has many recollections that I don't have. I remember the woods.

It was quite wooded then, was it? The Heights was still quite wooded?

Yes.

And were there prairie flowers around? A lot of prairie flowers?

Not so much as in Illinois, in the Illinois prairies that I was used to.

Quite a spread. But lots of squirrels and, I suppose, rabbits and things?

Chipmunks were my favorite. I kept a record of their comings and goings for years.

I know you married an important scientist. Your husband, William Noland, was a zoologist, right?

Lowell Noland.

Lowell. That was your father's name.

Wayland Chase.

Yes, I was confusing them. But did you, yourself, study? Were you a scientist?

Of sorts.

Down in the marshes, the old University farm, as a beginning, I suppose?

I can remember the Hill folk, for instance. That was a group of the young people near the top of the hill.

What did you call it?

The Hill folks. I'm thinking back, of course, to the [Charles E.] Buells and the Knowltons and the [Richard Theodore] Elys. I can't think of everybody.

Did the [Frederick Jackson] Turners have children your age as well?

Well, they're in a different generation.

What about the Stevens?

The Stevens. Yes.

Were they roughly your generation? The young folks?

The young folks, yes.

We live in their house now.

Oh, you do?

Yes.

That's very interesting. I was thinking of the Maurers. And there was the Knowltons and the [Evander] McGilvays [unclear]. That's about near the Stevens. Maybe it's the house you live in.

We live in the one at 1908 Arlington, down below the street a little bit, in the old Stevens house. But most of these families had children, young people, your age that you were in grade school with and playing with, I suppose?

Playing with.

Of course, you were twelve or thirteen when you came. You were getting to think you were sort of beyond some childish play, I suppose.

Yes. I was very timid and shy, so I didn't get acquainted as easily as some people. Gertrude Wilson was the youngest in her family and her next sister was Margaret, who was my best friend. I got well acquainted with them. Then there was Anna Ely.

Was she roughly your age?

Yes.

Or at least someone you played or spent time with?

And, as I say, we had the Hill folk.

I like that.

The boys used to tease us because the girls were the Hill folk.

I see. No boys in that club.

No. We were very insulated that way.

Well, did you play with the boys at all at that age?

Not much. They were teasing.

If you call that playing.

The girls had their meetings. For example, the Skinners had meetings and if they had ice cream, the boys would sneak in and try to get their portions.

Naughty.

Yes, naughty.

Did you make use of Lake Mendota at all? Did you swim at the Willows or elsewhere? Or was swimming not a very popular thing to do?

I didn't learn to swim for some time. I don't remember when I did.

But that wasn't a thing you all did together in the summer, to go down to the beach?

No, I don't think so.

I understand there was a steamboat on the lake.

Yes.

Did you ever go on that?

That was on Monona.

Oh, I see.

The steamboat was very interesting. Of course, when I came here, we came by train from Chicago. I think my first recollection of Madison was that we had a horse and buggy sort of taxi.

Somebody told me that there was a stable down below someplace, maybe at the corner of Chamberlain and Kendall. Do you remember that?

Yes, I remember that.

Was that sort of a community stable? Or did it belong to one of the families?

It belonged to one of the families.

I see. I think a person or two had horses and maybe a carriage. But generally speaking would you call for a horse and carriage if you needed? The same as you would call for a taxi today? Not often, but could you do that?

I suppose we could. I know we did rent a horse and buggy. I loved to drive. We would go out along the shores of Lake Mendota, down at the Willows, along that drive. Funny. I had almost forgotten that.

But there were streetcars, too, weren't there? Did they come out to Breese Terrace? Or maybe out as far as the graveyards by the time you came to Madison?

Yes. I can't be sure just how far they came, but they stopped along University Avenue, I think.

If you wanted to go downtown when the weather was nice, would you walk or would you go on the streetcar?

We would go on the streetcar in the summer. They were open cars, so you got a great pleasure out of riding on the streetcars, going downtown shopping or something.

It sounds like fun. There were, I suppose what would have been called dry good stores on the Square and other kinds of... hardware, I suppose.

Yes. Yes, there were. I'm trying to think. What I'm trying to think of is that when we first came to Madison, we stayed at Mrs. Pierce's Boarding House.

Oh? Downtown?

Yes. For the first year.

While your house was being built?

Yes. We stayed at Mrs. Pierce's Boarding House. That was down on Pinckney Street.

I've seen a reference to it someplace. Your whole family? That was your father, your mother. Did you have other children in the family? You were the only one?

I was the only one. And I was thinking of the White City. Did you ever hear of the White City?

No. What was that?

It was a wonderful spot. We'd go on the open streetcar down near Chicago. The White City was an amusement park. It had so many different new things. I know that it had an acre of a little village and it had the first moving picture that I would have seen, I think. You got on and you were in the back of a railroad car and watching the scenery.

That must have been a real treat. You didn't get to do that often, I suppose.

There were big horses that... I don't remember just what they did. One of the other things that they had was John Phillip Sousa's open air theater. He played there. That was my first meeting with that.

There must have been theatrical and musical things on the campus? Or Fuller's Opera House

was operating then, wasn't it? Did you ever go to events on the campus when you were of a high school age? Do you remember?

Oh, yes. The one nice thing was that they had an open air theater back of what was Main Hall. They had some Shakespearean plays, I remember.

The [unclear] Players, perhaps. My husband has spoken of seeing them. Shakespearean troupers.
It was a very lovely theater, really.

On the back of Bascom Hill, would that be? On the downward slope toward the west, I suppose?

Yes. That's right. [Unclear] Players were very much in everything.

When you came, did you go to Randall School? Were you the right age for Randall School then? It had been built, I think, about 1906, the Randall Elementary School. Or where did you go to school?

I didn't go to school.

Oh? Tutored at home?

I was tutored at home.

Some of your friends went there?

All my friends went there.

Was your mother or your father your tutor? Or neither?

Both, I guess.

Your father was a professor of history, I think? Or history and education? Or do you remember?

Yes. At that time we lived, as I say, at Morgan Park. I guess I was about twelve then and... I lost my train of thought.

But when you came here, you were still tutored? Did you ever go to public or private... did you ever go to school?

Yes, I did. I went to the most remarkable school. It was called Fools' Retreat by the Madison high school people.

School for what was it?

Fools' Retreat.

Fools' Retreat. Ah, yes, yes! University High School. Yes.

Yes. It was Miss Richmond's Academy.

Was it on the campus?

No. It was down on the corner of State and Gilman. Miss Sue had the elementary children and Miss Charlotte taught the upper class, the Richmond people. Mrs. Nafziger of Monona, her family was connected with the Richmonds.

Fools' Retreat.

Until I graduated at the Academy. I can remember so well children from the La Follette family came with their pony carts [to Miss Sue's classes].

That was quite a sight, I should think. In from Maple Bluff?

Yes. Miss Sue would try to instill a sense of responsibility in the young children. One morning we found we couldn't get into the building. The youngest La Follette had the key and he wasn't going to let anybody in until she [Miss Sue] kissed him.

Miss Richmond?

Yes. That was the younger La Follette, Phil.

Young Phil, yes. Well, those must have been interesting days. And then did you go on to the university?

Yes, the university here.

Did you study science mostly? Or not at all?

Yes. I was interested in biology in general. But I forget some things that came before [my university days] and that was the drives around Willow Drive with the rented horse. That was a treat, as far as I was concerned. I graduated before the university took over the Academy. That lasted until... well, that was the last year, I guess, when I graduated. My father was, I remember...

The commencement speaker?

Yes. He was the commencement speaker. We had good friends and we mostly walked to school from out here in the Heights. A very delightful high school, really.

Yes. I should think that would have been a very good way to learn. I was going to ask you also about within your homes. I'm sure that they were comfortable and some of them really quite fine. But you must not have had a lot of the so-called modern conveniences we have today. You had the windmill and water from the well. I suppose laundry was done at home?

I don't know.

You didn't have to wash, obviously.

We used rainwater for that.

We're having an interruption here. We'll take this opportunity to turn the tape over and start on tape one, side two. This is an interview with Ruth Chase Noland, in September of 1982, by Julia Schwenn for Historic Madison. This is tape one, side two. Mrs. Noland, we were talking about the comforts of your home inside. Probably with a family your size you didn't have to have live-in help. I know that some of the families in the Heights with...

We did have maids that lived in the house. In fact, one of them is still alive and was a good friend of mine when she worked for us until she got married. Her sister was married to somebody on the agricultural school, too. I can't remember all the details. What I was going to say about Miss Richmond's School was that Mrs. Nafziger is related to the Richmonds and she could give you an awful lot about Madison.

Yes. We'll follow up on that. Someone also said that some of you people here in the Heights shared a handyman. I've forgotten his name. He would work in various people's gardens, help in their gardens. Probably by the time you came you weren't paying much attention to things like the younger children might have.

Well, it was after the wars and people... what was it, when they had...

They had victory gardens.

... the man of the week, who would go around and work in the yards.

Man of the week, did you say?

They were trying to make work for the people who were very hard-up after the war.

This would have been in the early... around 1920, somewhere around in there.

I imagine so.

Do you think you all had vegetable gardens?

Oh, yes.

Chickens?

Yes. That's right. I had a [unclear], which I was very fond of. I also had a dog and we had cats.

Dogs could run through without leashes?

I don't know. [Unclear] was pretty well restricted. But when I was born in Illinois, the cat was the part of the family who helped bring me up. "The Old Lady," we called her. She didn't like to hear me cry when I was a little girl and so she would nip me and train me that way.

That's interesting. That's rather unique. Part of your tutoring, early education.

We were very fond of our cats, of course. And [later] I wanted a pony. We compromised and they got me a dog, an Airedale puppy, from Canada. A Canadian puppy, a thoroughbred. We had her for fourteen years.

She came from Illinois to Madison with you?

Yes.

And lived in Mrs. Pierce's Boarding House?

Well, that was the strange thing. When we moved in to Madison, we didn't have any place to live in while the house was being built and so part of the time we lived in Mrs. Pierce's Boarding House. I remember one unpleasant event. At one breakfast time somebody said there was something the matter with one of the men. We found that he had cut his throat. That was an exciting experience. My mother was ill when we came to Madison a good deal and so we had to have a doctor. The doctor was Dr. Louie Head.

Head?

Yes. He had a daughter. His daughter was Catherine Brandenburg. He saw that I was very lonely and a stranger here so...

I know that name, the family.

They were a bit older than I, but they were very nice to me and helped me get acquainted. Then the history department... of course, my father was by that time teaching in the university and not in the academy, where he had been teaching.

When he first came.

We lived for another part of the year in the rectory of Grace Church.

Down on the Square?

Right.

Now, your family, were they church people? Were they of the Episcopal church? Or did you just happen to live in the rectory?

Well, I don't know exactly, but they were Baptists and Unitarians.

So as a girl did you go to services on Sunday? Where did you go, if any place? Baptist or Unitarian or both?

The rector's wife wanted to bring me up in the right way and so she took me to lectures on ancient history. I got a real acquaintance with those things. Then at the end of the year that we stayed we moved out, of course, to our new home.

In the suburbs.

In the suburbs. [When we left our home in Chicago] we left the cats with the people who bought the house from us. But the dog, my beloved dog, was to stay in a boarding home, so to speak, between Chicago and Wisconsin. She was lost. I don't know how she happened to be lost, but they couldn't find her. She had jumped the fence.

Looking for you, probably.

Exactly. We advertised and hunted for her for several months. Finally somebody out on a farm saw our ad in the paper from Chicago and so we got her back.

Ah, good! But that was after some months?

Yes, it was.

I'll bet you were distressed.

I was, indeed. And when we got her [back], she was in a crate coming in by train, and she was so glad to see us.

She remembered you?

Oh, yes! She just tore at the crate. Her mouth was bloody before we could get her out.

That's a devoted dog.

Yes. And I was so devoted to her. My mother and father, of course, took a lot of care of her when I was in school. I was thinking of one of the things going back and the earliest music that... we had a piano. I've still got the piano.

Oh? This one? Great!

And the phonograph, not a Victrola. It was something new to me, the phonograph records.

Those big thick records, yes.

I remember that.

Did you have music lessons?

Yes, I had music lessons, but they didn't take.

Same with me. There was, I'm sure, a great deal of social life in the Heights and cultural

activities. You wrote, I think, about the... was it called University Heights Poetry Club?

Yes.

Your mother would have been a member of that, I suppose?

Yes. Mother and father. We had many interesting meetings. The Poetry Club just died out of old age. I'm supposed to be writing a review of the life of the Poetry Club. I hope I'll do it sometime.

You haven't started yet? You have some notes, I'll bet.

My husband turned over to the Historical Society a certain number of volumes on the Poetry Club.

Oh, good. But you are supposed to write some short piece on it, a relatively short piece?

Yes.

Were you married soon after your university years? Or not until later?

I was a graduate student in biology. My future husband's office-mate was also in biology and we knew the... oh, dear, I'm getting tangled up. The chairman of the biology department at that point was Professor [Michael F.] Guyer. He was a well known researcher and the chairman of the department. But that was an earlier time, really, before we were married. I can remember the rabbits and that they were injecting in their ears. It was Dr. Guyer and Betty Smith was his assistant and I was full time assistant for the department.

A researcher or teaching assistant or a little of both?

A teaching assistant. One day I heard Dr. Guyer go by the office. In my office I would do a good deal of the record work besides, and he said "This is my secretary's office." I didn't quite appreciate that.

Well, it's a term that's often used to cover a lot of things that really aren't quite within that realm.

Yes.

But it was through those connections that you met your husband. Have you ever lived away from Madison? From the time you first came up from Illinois?

No, I haven't lived away, but I have traveled somewhat. I went to Woods' Hole and was a student there two summers.

Oh! Great! During your graduate years?

Yes. I think it was sort of a... I don't know what you call it, but we had an opportunity to go there anyhow.

I'll bet that was an exciting, rewarding time.

Yes, it was. And the two office-mates become husband and wife. She from the biology department and I, too, from the biology department. She's still my best friend.

Good! That's a long, long time. That would have been when? In the 1930s, early 1930s, when you were at Woods' Hole? Or when would you think that was?

Yes, I guess it was about that time.

There was something else I wanted to ask about and that is the churches. You've told me of your checkered background. The churches were all downtown then, I guess, were they?

No.

There were some out in this area?

Yes. There was the Unitarian Church.

Yes, but that was down on the Square, just off the Square or on the Square then, wasn't it? The Unitarian Church?

I guess it was.

And the Baptists, you spoke of Baptist connections. I think probably their church was just off the Square, I guess. I'm really ignorant of that.

I'm not sure. You asked about this church. It was in Morgan Park, so that's in Illinois.

And, of course, the rectory, the Grace Church and its rectory, were where they still are, down on the Square.

That's right.

The Episcopal Church over here on Regent Street was not built when you were a young person, I'm sure. What about politics? Do you remember if there political discussions in your home and among your friends? Or were you not particularly a political person? I suppose with your studies you really didn't have time to pay much attention.

No. It's funny. I don't remember politics, except the La Follette family.

Yes. That was enough to keep buzzing.

The most interesting thing just happened to me. My granddaughter-in-law is taking English. She's Spanish and she's studying English. I asked her where she was going for her lessons and she said "Well, I'm going to the corner of State and Gilman." I said "Where are you going?" And she said "Well, we go upstairs. There's a big room up there and we have our lessons there." I realized that that was where the Academy, Miss Richmond's Academy, had been. It's funny how things come together.

Yes. That's interesting.

I'm afraid I'm keeping you too long.

No. I was thinking that we really covered a lot of ground, but we haven't tapped or taped all of your memories, I'm sure. Do you think of anything else we want to be sure to get down? I think you've really given us a very good feeling of what's been a long life here in University Heights.

Yes. For me, it's the only place I've really lived.

I'm glad it [the new house] was ready for you to come. I guess the first homes were built just a very few years before you came. I had it written down some place. I think the Buell home must have been built about 1894 or 1895, and the Hillyers on Kendall in 1895, and the Knowltons was built in 1894 or 1895.

And the Elys.

They had bought the land. He was the first one to buy land here, I've read, Professor Ely. The house was commissioned in 1896, but I don't have an exact date for when it was built. I suppose it was just after that. The Whitsons apparently built their house in 1906. I don't know where that house is.

It's over on Arlington.

Oh, I see. Oh, yes. It's the house at 1920 Arlington, yes. Then, of course, the Bradley, the Louis Sullivan home, was 1909. They were just a little later than your home.

I remember playing on the hill there right across the street from that place. There were some nice big rocks. I played up there. That was before, I mean, it was in the early times.

Probably quite soon after you moved out into your new home, I suppose. It must have been a pleasant childhood and later years as well.

It really is a good life. It is for me.

Well, you've had an interesting, worthwhile life. I know a few of the things you've been involved in. I hope you come up with that Poetry Club resume some rainy day.

Several of the books are already in the Historical Society. Gladys Borchess was in the Poetry Club. She's still going strong.

Yes, I've seen her a time or two in the last year. I sometimes meet with some of the women in the neighborhood who read books together, or they read books and sometimes they talk about those books when they get together. It sometimes seems to me they don't talk so much about the books but about other things. She was in that group. And I don't know what others you'd know. Mildred Richards, our neighbor, and Kay Larson, who's next, down in I guess what was the Miles house, if my history is right.

In the McGilvary house?

The McGilvary house is...

Next to the Stevens.

Yes. A family named Miller now lives there.

Is that Midge Miller?

No, Midge Miller was kitty-corner from there. They moved out a little farther and now I think she's having to move back into her district because they redistricted everything and got it all messed up. Did you get your absentee ballot filled out?

I did. And I voted for Midge Miller.

Good! I intend to do the same. Well, thanks much again. We're going to put these tapes together in some good place, possibly... well, they'll first be the property of Historic Madison and then a decision is to be made as to where they will be lodged, perhaps in a special section in the Public Library where people from metropolitan Madison can have good access to them, if they go through the proper procedures. I'll let you know how this turns out, whether I've blown it, or if the machine keeps running. We'll edit out this last part where we've just been chatting.

[Unclear].

I hope I haven't tired you.

No.

When I talked to you I thought you were a little hesitant. I didn't want to push you, but still I thought once we sat down together that we could make a go of it.

I hope so.

I'm glad you are able to stay in your home. That's the thing to do if you possibly can, isn't it?

Yes. They made it possible for me, my good friends. This floor is mine, with my cats. There's a porch, the screened porch. I can't go down to the basement and I can't go upstairs.