



**Worthington Memory**

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## Oral History Interview with Mary Gnezda Winter

Jennifer L.M.: My name is Jennifer Lane Maier and I am speaking with Mary Gnezda Winter on Thursday, March 5th, 2020. And we are here to discuss Mary's experiences living both in Colonial Hills and a lifetime in Worthington.

Jennifer L.M.: So to begin, in the 1950s and '60s, your name appears in "The [Columbus] Dispatch" as a hostess and organizer—they use the word "hostess"—for programs about childhood development. And, of course, you're always referred to as Mrs. Walter Gnezda rather than Mary Gnezda. And if you could please tell us a little bit more about your interests and activities at that time.

Mary W.: Yes, that was the time when I had young preschool children and I don't remember how I got into it exactly, but it was the American Association of University Women and I was starved for some activity outside of the house and I joined that group and one of the study groups was a childhood study group. It was a small group of women, maybe 10 at the most.

Mary W.: They were all about the same age with children about the same age. They were all educated women, some were teachers, some were child development specialists. We met and studied early childhood development together, shared our experiences with our children about our children. I thought it was very stimulating and very helpful and the women were just really a delight to know.

Mary W.: We became bonded friends and I did that until my husband lost his job and I took responsibility in the group. I became program chairman one year and I wasn't in it too many years but it meant a lot to me.

Jennifer L.M.: Yeah, sounds like perhaps it was a release of sorts from being labeled a homemaker.



- Mary W.: It was.
- Jennifer L.M.: Strictly a homemaker.
- Mary W.: Yes. It was a release. As I said, one of the things I wanted was to find something to do outside of the house and that was it.
- Mary W.: It was meaningful and the ability to make friends with people of this sort was a wonderful experience.
- Jennifer L.M.: Were you involved in the effort here in Worthington that eventually led to the establishment of kindergartens in Worthington schools?
- Mary W.: Well, I haven't done as much as some people, I suppose. When Walt and I bought the house in Worthington, as I think I mentioned that one point to you earlier, that schools brought us here, we'd heard how excellent the schools were. My kids were enrolled the summer before at University School in four- and five-year kindergarten. They were having such a wonderful experience there.
- Mary W.: I was thinking about Eric, who was just a baby then. And I thought, well, he'll just go to kindergarten in Worthington, it will be wonderful. Then I find out there is no kindergarten. A friend of mine, Dorothy [Gill] Barnes, you certainly know Dorothy Barnes, the internationally known fiber artist, was a friend of mine and her son and my son somehow later became very good friends. Dorothy and I met and I said to her, "I'm so upset that we have no kindergartens in Worthington. We're supposed to be top of the notch." She said, "Well, let's do something about it."
- Mary W.: So she and I and Penny Leach, she had MS—she and Dorothy and I started talking about this and talking in the neighborhood and giving talks about the value of kindergarten and could we do something about getting them established in Worthington. And let's see, who else was involved?
- Mary W.: Ray Burkhart, who lived across the street from us in Colonial Hills, was very much interested in it and gave us opportunities to speak to the Colonial Hills Civic Association and that kind of thing. I hated not being able to put Terry in kindergarten when we moved to Worthington. She was five and she'd had such a wonderful experience at University School and I wanted to continue that. But under the circumstances, I really didn't want to pay the \$35 fee. That's what the fee was. \$35 per child.



- Jennifer L.M.: For a year? Or for the month?
- Mary W.: No, it was for each quarter.
- Jennifer L.M.: Oh, wow.
- Mary W.: I told the kindergarten teacher, she was so delighted with my daughters and she said, "Well, we'd love to have you. You just fit in so well." Whatever that meant. We fit in because I love the school and the kids were very responsive and the more I learned about the school and its focus on creativity and the process they used for teaching the various subjects. They centered it on the subject and it was like a core curriculum.
- Mary W.: It was just wonderful. She said, "Well, we do have scholarships for some children." And so we had scholarships for the two girls. I would take it, we lived in Worthington, the school at the university, we had one car, Walt drove to North American [Aviation]. [Mary Winter had a correction following the interview. Walt was not working at North American Aviation at the time, but was employed by architect/builder Todd Tibbals as supervisor of a building project on the far east side of Columbus when the family moved to Colonial Hills. She noted that "The excellent reputation of Worthington Schools was one of the primary reasons we wanted to move to Worthington. But it was also through Walt's working contacts with Tibbals that Colonial Hills came to our attention as possible affordable housing in Worthington. It was Todd Tibbals, funded by the Defense Homes Corporation to build housing for World War II defense workers, who built Colonial Hills."]
- Mary W.: I would take the Worthington bus with my kids. Eric was just a baby. I carried him and we'd go down to Jeffery Place and I'd put the kids on the bus and they would go to University School and then I would go and get them. Took a lot of time. But that's how we did that. I decided that I'm going to drop out at the kindergarten group. We started, they probably have it and that's wonderful, but I'm going to stick with University School.
- Jennifer L.M.: I know that you wound up keeping your three children at University School until it ultimately closed in 1968.
- Mary W.: That's correct.
- Jennifer L.M.: What was it about the school and your children's experience there that you most appreciated? Obviously it was a lot of extra work to get them there and back.

- Mary W.: Yes, it was. The teachers extremely well trained. They were very committed to good education. There was an emphasis on critical thinking from kindergarten on and also creativity was a big thing. Any little art that was done was valued. The music teacher was outstanding. I think Eric at five wrote a little play that they performed. I mean they took everything that the kids did and really valued it and helped them develop.
- Mary W.: I was just thrilled with their education and it was diversified. They had various kinds of levels of kids. They had minorities and they had foreign kids and they had kids from educated families and kids not from so educated families. The classes were small. It was such a different experience than I'd had in school. From an educational point of view, I was very impressed with the emphasis on democratic values and teaching that to children very young. Respecting the rights of others and building confidence in them. They got a lot of attention.
- Jennifer L.M.: Do you feel as though by sending the children to University School, it made them different from other children? Did you worry about them integrating back into the Worthington schools once the University School closed in '68?
- Mary W.: No, I didn't worry about that at all because they had learned so many social skills. They learned to get along with people. They learned to make friends. University School had a program where every Wednesday afternoon was a free afternoon. That was for if you wanted to have music lessons, to have friends over, liked to go on field trips, all kinds of things that kids did on Wednesday afternoon.
- Mary W.: Maybe do something on campus. They were such secure kids. My kids went on the bus at first, I went the whole way with them to University School. About halfway through the year, one of the teachers said to me, "Why you do that? Your kids can do that. They can get on the bus and get off at Jeffery Place and you don't have to come all the way down here."
- Jennifer L.M.: That was a different era, wasn't it?
- Mary W.: It was a different era because you would not do it today. But then, they wouldn't be the only ones getting on because there was another family on Jeffery Place. So there were other kids, not many, but there were some.
- Mary W.: So they did that and they gave them a lot of confidence in their ability to handle themselves. At one point there was a biracial kid who came to and from Worthington to University School. Craig, what was his last name? Bernie and Chuck. He worked at WBNS.

- Jennifer L.M.: Would it be Craig White?
- Mary W.: Yes, Craig White.
- Mary W.: He was Eric's friend. We began to share rides and that stuff, I didn't do any driving because I didn't have a car. But parents were so wonderful to help.
- Jennifer L.M.: Wonderful. Now, from what your daughter, Niki said, it seems as though, and what you're saying too, with the riding the bus by themselves down to the university campus, that Colonial Hills, children and children generally were definitely what we would call free range children today.
- Jennifer L.M.: Was there consensus among parents at that time that children should be free to roam around after school? And riding the bus?
- Mary W.: I really don't know what the parents' motivation was in that, but they were not over-supervised children. I don't know what to say about that. I followed mine pretty closely and when I wasn't there, when I was working, Walt would sit on the stoop of the house and watch kids up and down the street. He couldn't go after them. But he certainly had his eye on them and they knew he was there if they needed to help.
- Mary W.: I don't know why they were not supervised very much. The kids played with them. And they went to the Selby Park activities independently. I never thought much about them. About the kids not being supervised. I mean I was such a meanie about it with my own kids, but I didn't notice too much.
- Jennifer L.M.: You became the breadwinner for your family at quite a young age and you had three children and a husband who needed a lot of support. Would you share with us a bit about how you got through that extremely challenging time and if there was anything about the Colonial Hills or Worthington community that helped or hindered you?
- Mary W.: Well, I can't say there was a lot of help in the community. I think that Colonial Hills families in our little block were very sympathetic with me and what I was going through. But they were all young just as we were and they were trying to make their way in the business world. Career-wise, the husbands were busy and the wives were busy with their young children. I don't think I had much support from people there.
- Mary W.: Twice, I remember that I couldn't get my husband out of a chair because he was so paralyzed at that point. Then I went next door to get a high school boy to

help and he came a couple of times and helped me with that. I think people were always sympathetic but they may not even have known how much support we needed because we really were a little bit different from everybody else. I was working and the other mothers were not. Walter was at home and wasn't interacting with the neighborhood. The women would not be comfortable with that.

Mary W.: So we didn't get a lot of support. My support came from the parents at University School and the teachers and administrators there were very supportive. One of the parents at University School was a social worker and if it had not been for Gladys Waite, I don't know where we would be today. We hadn't even bonded that much, but her son played with Niki a lot and came to her house on Wednesday afternoons or Niki went to theirs and they love Niki and maybe because of Niki.

Mary W.: She came to me one day and she said, "I'd like to talk to you a little bit about MS and what we can do for you as a social work." She told me about services and support services and things that have had probably one of the greatest impact on my family. If had not been for her, I don't know where we would be today.

Jennifer L.M.: What a gift.

Mary W.: I don't know if I ever was able to tell her what gratitude I feel for that woman, but she did not have to reach out to me. But she did. And she reached out to Walt and she and her husband invited us to her home a lot of times. It was wonderful, that's the kind of support that helped me a lot.

Mary W.: I had some family support. I don't mean that people came and babysat or did that, but they really tried to help me maintain emotional stability through it.

Jennifer L.M.: You were actually still in the hospital having just given birth to your third child when your husband was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1957. How did your neighbors and the community generally treat disabled people at that time?

Mary W.: Not very well. First of all, there weren't the laws that we have now. There weren't accommodations for wheelchairs. In fact, the attitude generally was that you hid your disabled people. They were disabled and so they were some sub-human.

Jennifer L.M.: So there was an element of shame somehow?



- Mary W.: Yes, there certainly was. I used to take Walt to different things in the wheelchair, different programs. I tried to take him to a concert. I tried to take him to lectures and stuff and I always felt uncomfortable. There were no accommodations for wheelchairs and auditoriums, stadiums, it wasn't easy to do.
- Mary W.: The other thing is I didn't like the sympathy that some people. I don't know why it was, I don't know. I didn't accept that very well. One time I took my kids downtown to Lazarus for their Christmas display and I took Walt with us and he was in the wheelchair at that time. I left him off at the front of the store and then parked the car. Well, when I went to get the car, I left him on the corner with, I think it was Terry, one of the kids, and took the other two with me. When I came back and picked him up, he seemed so upset and I didn't know what was the matter. So I said, "What's the matter?" And he said, he just opened his hand, showed me a quarter. He said, "I'm sitting on the corner, and this man gives me a quarter."
- Jennifer L.M.: Oh my goodness.
- Mary W.: What an insult.
- Jennifer L.M.: He thought that Walter was panhandling, would you think?
- Mary W.: I don't know whether he thought he was panhandling or whether he thought a quarter would make a difference in his life, but it made a lot of hurt. That's just one example. It was hard.
- Jennifer L.M.: Well, from its beginning in 1927, Colonial Hills was more or less promoted as an idyllic suburban neighborhood. And also, as was common in the early years in the 20th century, the deeds for homes in suburban neighborhoods explicitly prohibited their sale for anyone not of the "Caucasian race."
- Jennifer L.M.: Do you recall any concern in the Colonial Hills and Worthington community when the Fair Housing Act of 1968 prohibited discrimination by race?
- Mary W.: I don't remember any discussion about it. It never even occurred to me that we didn't know Black families in our community. I didn't know whether we did or not, but I didn't see any, of course. And having known Craig—
- Jennifer L.M.: Craig White?
- Mary W.: Craig White and Bernice and Harry Todd. I guess he was at Park Federal [Bank].

- Jennifer L.M.: Yeah, he was the bank president, maybe. I'll look that up.
- Mary W.: I don't know whether he was the president. But I saw some Afro-Americans in Worthington, but it didn't faze me one way or another. I didn't even hear any talk about it in Colonial Hills. I didn't even know that there was any kind of barrier.
- Jennifer L.M.: Even after that time, in later decades, did you ever have a sense that African Americans were being steered away from Worthington?
- Mary W.: I never felt they were being steered away. I just thought they probably couldn't afford it.
- Jennifer L.M.: Yes.
- Mary W.: Or they didn't want to live here. I don't know. I really didn't think about it very much.
- Jennifer L.M.: Well, I'm also curious about the Vietnam War era. The university was so roiled by anti-war protests at that time. Do you feel as though any of that filtered north up High Street?
- Mary W.: Well, I don't have any real clear memories of it happening in the Worthington area. Of course, I was on campus when it was going on. I was doing graduate work and I didn't even see it on campus very much because it was mostly around the administrative buildings.
- Jennifer L.M.: On the Oval?
- Mary W.: Yes, and I wasn't in that area. They canceled classes when it got really bad, so I wasn't down there very much. It went on and I saw the tearing up the bricks where the walks had been torn up and they finally put in concrete in some areas.
- Jennifer L.M.: Was that because they were throwing bricks?
- Mary W.: Yes, the students were digging them up and just throwing them. I don't remember that there was a lot of activity in Worthington related to it.
- Jennifer L.M.: Did you feel some kind of dissonance about going to work on campus, then returning to the quiet suburbs, or perhaps it didn't affect you that much at the time?





Mary W.: No, as a matter of fact, I was very sympathetic towards the people who were protesting. And I remember feeling that people weren't handling it very well at the university. But no, that didn't bother me a lot. I think I was just too wrapped up in my own life.

Jennifer L.M.: So as we wind up the interview, what are some of the most important things you'd like listeners to know about Worthington during your many long years here?

Mary W.: Well, I think it is a wonderful community to bring up a family. It is a family-oriented community. It really cares about its children. The schools attest to that. The community center, the swimming pool, all those, the parades, the park activities that were going on. It's very family-oriented. It's a unique historic town.

Mary W.: I love the New England styled center of town. It's just so charming and it's full of houses. It's not full of apartments and it's not full of big, high rise buildings and dilapidated. I mean, people take care of their houses, they value what we have and they're friendly.

Mary W.: It's a very friendly town. And religion plays a big part. When you think of all the churches in the town, there's an emphasis on morality and the grandparents who began the Circle of Grandparents program is an expression of their concern for children growing up with good character. I was a part of that and I loved it. It was wonderful to go into the schools and work with that.

Jennifer L.M.: Did you work with a specific child? Like did you have a—

Mary W.: No, we went to classes.

Jennifer L.M.: Got it. Okay.

Mary W.: Elementary school classes and we did our own thing. They were not teachers, but they were grandparents and came in with whatever way they had of talking about respect or honesty or—

Jennifer L.M.: So it's sort of tied in with that Citizenship for Character program.

Mary W.: Yes, it was. I think it's an expression of what this town focuses on.

Jennifer L.M.: That's a lovely way of putting it.



Mary W.: When [United Methodist] Children's Homes sold that back part and Worthington expanded with all those homes, that was really a wonderful thing because it just continued that focus on family. And now that they've got the new area that they want to redevelop, I hope to goodness they don't put in those horrible, heavy, condensed apartments that would just ruin the character of our town. It's such a beautiful town.

Mary W.: Arlington has its thing, but it doesn't have our history. It doesn't have our charm and I don't know of another city in the state of Ohio that matches it. Do any of you? I wonder if anybody knows one. I think I've been so lucky to have been able to bring up my family here. I think everybody who's been here is lucky. We can walk to the library almost any place from where you live and go downtown. The Home Market was so friendly. I ran into a kid the other day. He said, "I remember you." He said, "I worked at Home Market."

Jennifer L.M.: Oh my God.

Mary W.: He was one of the little boys that carried your groceries or whatever. And I asked him his name and I recognized it and it was really neat.

Mary W.: It's just wonderful.

Jennifer L.M.: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Mary W.: I don't know what else to share. I just feel so grateful for all the things that Worthington has given my family. I hope that we can give it back and I really love the bells of Worthington.

Jennifer L.M.: Now, Eric...is it the bells bells or Eric's song?

Mary W.: It's the bells bells, but I'm very proud of Eric's song.

Jennifer L.M.: Just for the interview, your son Eric Gnezda wrote the song, the "Bells of Worthington" for the Worthington bicentennial, correct?

Mary W.: He did. He did.

Jennifer L.M.: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much. It's been really a privilege to talk to someone who spent so many years here and lived in two very significant Worthington neighborhoods, Colonial Hills and Worthingway. [Mary Winter mentioned following the interview that she has also lived in Medick Estates.] Thank you so much for your time.



Mary W.:

You're welcome. I enjoyed it.