VILLAGE PRESERVATION

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

SHIRLEY WRIGHT

By Sarah Dziedzic

New York, NY

November 18, 2022

Shirley Wright at her home in the West Village, Photo by Sarah Dziedzic

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Shirley Wright

Sound-bite

"My name is Shirley Wright, and I live on West 11th Street…and I've been here since 1950, not in this exact location, but all in the West Village, west of Hudson Street… Sitting in the park with her is where I would meet other mothers, and I'd say, 'What nursery school are you going to?' One of the jobs that I'd had—Bank Street would get me jobs, and one of them was at a co-op nursery school. A couple of them were. They were popular in those days. There'd be a teacher, and the mothers would be the assistants. And I said, 'We could do that here.' So I spoke to my advisor at Bank Street, and she said, 'Oh, I think I know of a place.' It was this place on Horatio Street. Oh, my eyes lit up about Horatio Street; it was the school that had sold the house that I lived in…a nursery school that these women from Westchester in the 1930s bought. They bought the three houses on Horatio Street and made the little cubbies and the linoleum floors…and I actually knew that that building had been okayed for a nursery school, which was a huge, big plus."

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Additional Quotes

"But after I'd been out a year, a friend from college wrote to me and said, "I think we ought to take a bicycle trip to Europe, just on our own, not join a group. Would that be fun?" Mm-hmm. So I thought that would be wonderful fun. And she was very organized. She'd worked in D.C. for a year, whereas I'd done my little jobs out in Ohio. But she'd figured it all out, and had a little notebook with all our contacts and everything. She'd even gotten to the Raleigh Bicycle Company so that we could pick up our brand new bicycles. She was very organized, needless to say. And oddly enough, my mother, of course, was all in favor of this. The grandmother not so much, but we managed to talk her into it. My grandmother supplied whatever money we needed, but it was all under two thousand dollars. This was in 1949. So we did it. We got on a boat at the bottom of 23rd Street in Manhattan and went to Europe." (Wright p. 2)

"Louise called from Brooklyn and said, 'I've found this crazy place on Horatio Street in the Village.' I didn't know much about the Village. I'd been once with a beau to Nick's in the Village, and that was about the extent of my knowledge of the Village. Except that I knew it historically because of all the references. But I said, 'Oh sure, let me come down.' And I did. It was a full floor-through in a brick front house on Horatio Street that had just been redone. I mean, the bathroom worked, although it was down three steps from the main floor, never mind that. It had a fireplace. And it had been a nursery school, [laughs] so that the floors were red

linoleum, and the room that we would have a bedroom in had little cubbies for toys and books all around the edges. But that was fine. And there was one single bedroom, which you called the hall bedroom, and that we gave to Louise, because she was a student. We were just, you know, regular working people, but she needed her quiet. Ha!" (Wright p. 7–8)

"My grandmother had originally started out as a teacher, so teaching was fine. She was getting pretty dotty by that time, but she was still alive. So they thought that was fine. That was very plus. And it was great to have to walk across the street. All I had to do was walk across Hudson Street and there was the school. But then I also had the student teaching. They called me to substitute a lot in Bank Street because I lived so close by, if someone was sick or couldn't come in. So I had a lot of extra classroom time observing first rate teachers. That was very nice. Very productive. That went on for several years." (Wright p. 12)

"For me, the emphasis was on the parents learning. I thought it was fabulous for them to be in the classroom. And it's terribly hard for the teacher—I don't want to say it's terribly hard—but you have to have a certain looseness so that you can manage that. And indeed, there are always times when you have somebody who's very difficult, and you have to deal with it. But rarely, in this kind of a thing. It all worked out." (Wright p. 23)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Shirley Wright

Shirley Wright grew up in Mansfield, Ohio in the 1930s, where she attended nursery school as a child at a school that was started by a student of John Dewey from the University of Ohio—her first experience with progressive early childhood education. She attended Vassar College, after which she joined a classmate on a bicycle trip around post-World War II Europe, staying in youth hostels wherever they traveled. This experience eventually landed her a job in New York City, where she moved to work in 1950. She took an opportunity to move into an apartment in the West Village soon after.

Eventually she sought other work and was advised to try nursery school teaching, which she found that she enjoyed. She enrolled in Bank Street College of Education, and began to get experience student teaching and substitute teaching, and was particularly impressed with schools that relied on the cooperative model, which involved the parents having an active role in their child's classroom. After her eldest child was born, she and other mothers of young children in the West Village decided to establish a local cooperative nursery school, the West Village Nursery School, that could serve the children and parents in the neighborhood and would follow the progressive Bank Street model. The school opened in 1962.

In this interview, which took place when Wright was over 95 years old, Wright recounts her experiences teaching at the West Village Nursery School and serving as its teacher-director. She also describes the effort to open the school, with her knowledge from experiences working with Bank Street College, and with the energy, skill, and vigor of the other founding mothers, Anne Tonachel, Barbara Williams, Dori Kimball, and Kate Brown. She also provides a detailed description of the residents of her block on West 11th Street in the West Village, where she has lived for over six decades.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by Village Preservation.

The Village Preservation Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

THANK YOU

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Today is November 18, 2022, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Shirley Wright for the Village Preservation Oral History Project. And I'm going to start by reading a land acknowledgement before we start our interview. Today we're on the traditional land of the Lenape people, and we acknowledge for this archival recording the Lenape community, and especially their elders past and present, and express gratitude for their stewardship of this land, for contributing to its geography, and for the use of their language as place names. Before we really get started, can you start by introducing yourself? Saying your name, and just a brief introduction of who you are.

Wright: My name is Shirley Wright, and I live on West 11th Street on—I'm learning about the Lenape territory, that's fabulous—and I've been here since 1950, not in this exact location, but all in the West Village, west of Hudson Street.

Dziedzic: Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up, and what kind of lineages and family histories were part of your household when you were young?

Wright: Oh, interesting. Yes, I'm from North Central Ohio, halfway between Cleveland and Columbus, a medium-sized, mostly manufacturing town—in the [19]30s, very depressed, but an interesting time for a little child. Because my father had to leave town "to get work," as they say, I lived with my grandparents, my mother's family, in the family home in the town where they had a business at that time. The grandfather died fairly soon after and I grew up with my grandmother as the boss, and my mother and myself in an old Victorian house on one of the main streets of the town. I went to the local grammar school that my mother and her brothers had gone to, and went on from there, and finally graduated from high school there. Had a grand time, because by the time I was in high school, the war had begun, which, of course, picked up the manufacturing part of the town, so things were getting better.

I always thought it was the perfect childhood because I could walk around the neighborhoods, even though my grandparents' house was on one of the main streets, which really is now Route 30, east-west. But that was all good.

I was supposed to go East to school. My mother had not gone East to school. She had gone North to a women's college, from which she graduated just at the time of the First World War. Then she was sent to France to work by the YMCA in one of the leave areas in France—for American soldiers, they weren't called GI's then—which had not been occupied by the Germans. Anyway, so she'd had an adventurous time after college doing that and came back to the town afterwards, as did I, after college, when you were supposed to find a "little job." In my day, you could have a little job. I went to secretarial school to learn a little bit of shorthand and improve my typing, and got a little job. Worked in a bookstore for a while and for a young lawyer who'd just graduated from law school. Poor thing, [laughs] to have me—well, I answered his phone and did a little typing for him. It was little jobs.

But after I'd been out a year, a friend from college wrote to me and said, "I think we ought to take a bicycle trip to Europe, just on our own, not join a group. Would that be fun?" Mm-hmm. So I thought that would be wonderful fun. And she was very organized. She'd worked in D.C. for a year, whereas I'd done my little jobs out in Ohio. But she'd figured it all out, and had a little notebook with all our contacts and everything. [00:05:00] She'd even gotten to the Raleigh Bicycle Company so that we could pick up our brand new bicycles. She was very organized, needless to say. And oddly enough, my mother, of course, was all in favor of this. The grandmother not so much, but we managed to talk her into it. My grandmother supplied whatever money we needed, but it was all under two thousand dollars. This was in 1949. So we did it. We got on a boat at the bottom of 23rd Street in Manhattan and went to Europe.

INTERRUPTION

Dziedzic: Can you tell me just a little bit more about the town that you grew up in? What was the name of the town, and what kind of manufacturing?

Wright: Mansfield, Ohio. It was, I would have thought, ideal. I had friends whose houses I could walk to and come home from easily. Knew their families. My mother had gone to school with some of their families. I mean, it was very much a town like that. I think it was, about the time that I was growing up, between forty and fifty thousand. I have no idea how big it is now. It's in hard times a bit now in the Rust Belt, as we call it, but it was certainly not that in those days. My

grandfather's company, which was being run, by now, by his sons—my mother had three brothers—so she was the logical one to stay home and take care of the mother. And there I was. They were taking care of me very handsomely, sent me to a good college, and there I was going to Europe with my friend, Barbara.

Dziedzic: And what was the school that you went to?

Wright: Vassar College. I started in '44, so the war was still going on, and so we were rather restricted. There was something there that we had to be restricted—it was polio. It was before polio had any cure. So we were all restricted to the campus. We couldn't go anywhere. And besides that, the young men my age, the boys, were all being drafted right after high school. They had to join either of the services. They could be in the Great Lakes Naval training station, or they could be in Fort So-and-So, somewhere else. But that's mostly what was happening to them. So it wasn't a really glorious time to think about "fun" college, but it was serious college so that was okay too.

Dziedzic: You kind of alluded to this, that it was somewhat typical—you did something that was expected of you, something else that your girlfriends did, which was to go to a college and to get a "little job," as you said—

Wright: —when we came home. I'd majored in psychology, mostly because they didn't require long written theses. You could take an exam instead of writing a thesis, and that appealed to me a lot. Writing was very difficult for me [laughs], for my own reasons. But I graduated in good stead, that was okay. And I had a lot of good friends left over from that, but the one who'd gone to work in D.C. was the one who'd called me about the bicycle trip.

Dziedzic: Did she enlist? Was she in D.C. because she had enlisted in the army to do an administrative job?

Wright: No. She was working in some government little job. Her job was little too, but it was for the government.

Dziedzic: I see.

Wright: She ended up being in the CIA. But this was early on.

Dziedzic: Okay. So how did you get from Ohio to the pier on 23rd Street?

Wright: On a train. We took trains in those days. It wasn't so much flying everywhere, because it was still early. We got on an ex-troop ship. It didn't have hammocks or any of those things [laughs]. [00:09:58] But there were multiple beds in a big dormitory style thing, and there were a lot of people like us going over there. We had just a fabulous time, you know, just as you should have had. And then, because Barbara, my friend, had gotten everything organized in England, she knew places to stay. We stayed at places like the English-Speaking Union, which she somehow had gotten access to. We went out and picked up our bicycles, traveled a little bit around getting used to them, and avoided big cities because we had to learn to ride those bicycles properly. I'd not had a geared bicycle before. I mean, I just had my old Montgomery Ward bike from childhood. I didn't have a fancy one.

So let's see. We were in England, and then we went to France. Barbara had majored in Spanish, so she knew the Spanish but we went to France. I'd taken several years of college French—three—so I could deal a bit. It was interesting. It took a little work, but that was good. And we loved France. Landed in the rain in Le Havre and had to find our way. It was just the little French villages. Managing. We had on ponchos or something to keep us dry. But there were youth hostels. We joined the International Youth Hostel, which was really very active and popular in Europe, unlike the United States. You would have had to go to Cape Cod to find where the American Youth Hostels had started, on Cape Cod. And wasn't much beyond New England at that point. Or now—I don't know. So we had a wonderful time.

Did go to Paris, where of course there were some college friends that we met up with. But we were mostly in Normandy, seeing the wreck from the post-war. That was '49, so there was a lot so see there. We went out to Brittany, which was all windswept and much less developed, but had not been so wretched in the war. After that we went back to Paris.

Then we went to Switzerland, I think. Yes. How did we get to Switzerland? I don't remember that. Trains, I think, not flying. We did not fly. We took trains, because buses and trains would take your bicycles with no question. They just put them on, and you sat down, and there you went. But it was unusual to be American girls on our own. That was interesting, but not scary. People were not as aggressive as they seem to be now, in any way shape or form. They sort of marveled that we were doing this. We stayed in youth hostels, and occasionally slept in fields if we couldn't find a youth hostel near enough, or near where we wanted to go. So that was good. Switzerland. I can remember being in Bern, I think.

And then we were going down to Germany. Now, that was interesting. I remember it was down a hill, down into southern Germany, near Munich somewhere. And I thought, this is <u>really</u> scary, going into foreign territory. I was going to have to get out my German, which was much less than the French because I'd only had, I think, two years of German, although I'd had three of French. So that was interesting, riding down from the Alps into southern Germany. The Germans were very pleasant to us, but a little surprised that we were there, especially in the southern parts. Well, that's all we did at that point, partly the Alps. Well, the Alps we'd done in Switzerland. We were getting to be pretty rigorous bicyclists by that time.

Dziedzic: Yes, wow! How did seeing Normandy with your own eyes change your feeling about the war that had happened?

Wright: Well, how incredibly destructive it was, and how many people had died on <u>any</u> side. On any side. [00:14:59] What devastation the people had seen. You know, the ones who were serving us our coffee, or putting up with us in the youth hostels. They were all glad to have jobs. So it was all fascinating and an enormous amount to take in. Well, anyway, we were gone until September. We landed in May in England, and came home in September. And that was all with the new bicycles. Of course, brought them home.

Dziedzic: And at this time you were nineteen or twenty?

Wright: No. Well, I'd graduated from college and I'd been home for a year. I was twenty-one dash twenty-two. That was the year for me. But we'd had an incredibly fabulous time, and we

knew that. It was a very special kind of time. So Barbara went back to D.C. and got a bumped-up job. She got a much better job with the government, but I can't remember what. She moved from agency to agency, and ended up in the Secret Service—CIA, I think it was.

I went back to Ohio and it was still coming-home time, and still college time for lots of the men. I was having a good time in Ohio by this time. The boys that I'd gone to high school with, they'd gotten out of the service, having been in places like Japan and Germany, and learned a lot themselves. So they were [laughs] more interesting than they had been before, and it was fun. It was very much of a time.

But I knew that I couldn't go back to stay. I knew that by the time we got back. So I wrote a letter in my own handwriting, or I may have typed it—by that time I could really type a little better—I wrote this letter to the American Youth Hostels to say I just had this fabulous trip, and I know that you're planning more. They had moved from Massachusetts to New York, to East 39th Street—perfectly good address—and were expanding and planning trips in the same countries that I'd been to. We had not—neither one of us knew Italian [laughs], so we avoided Italy, and Spain was a step too far and they were not geared up for the youth hostel set at that point, so Barbara was wasting her Spanish, but never mind [laughs]. So I wrote to the youth hostels and said that I would help you plan your trips. I've actually been in the hostels and been in many of the towns, and could even help you plan the trips. And they wrote back and said, "Fine. You're on."

Well, that was a blow to the family, but it was a real job that had a real salary. And I'd met a girl that had not gone to my college—she had gone to a different college—and she was planning to come and she had a job at *Time Life*, which meant that she was already a step ahead [laughs] of me with the American Youth Hostels. And she was planning to get an apartment in New York, so I came to New York. We got together and found a place on the Upper West Side, West 82nd Street, just off the park, which was half of a—you know, the buildings up there are much bigger. They were all built in the early 1900s, I think. We had half of a floor. We had a living room, a single bedroom that we could take two beds in, and she brought a friend with her. She'd grown up in Argentina and she brought an Argentine friend. So the three of us lived in the half a floor, and the other girl had some job. Anyway. So that was, again, a time of the world with that sort of thing.

Dziedzic: And what was the kitchen and the bathroom like in that apartment? [00:19:58]

Wright: Oh. Well, minute. The bathroom had a shower, not a tub, I think. And the kitchen was behind a curtain that rolled down. I knew much more about cooking than either of the other two girls, since I'd grown up in my mother and grandmother's house, but we did minimal things. It was fun. I didn't have any particular fellows or beaus, but just a motley crew of people that you'd meet and it was fun. It was, again, a very good time. I enjoyed my work, which was appropriate, and there was a very nice sort of New Englandy staff that had come down. Even the people that they'd gotten in New York were—I don't want to say more wholesome [laughs]—but you didn't have to worry about anything.

Dziedzic: How did you commute to your job?

Wright: On the subway. It was very easy. Changed at West 4th and went up Sixth Avenue to 42nd. But if you're on the last car of the train, you get out at 40th Street. The thing was on 39th and Fifth, right across from Lord & Taylor, right down from Arnold Constable. And there was a huge Lamston's that had a lunch counter that was very cheap [laughs]. That was fun. Yes, it was a glamorous part of town, actually, to work in. Not as good as Madison Avenue, maybe, but only a few blocks away. That's what many of the people that I eventually met were about—they were in the ad business. So—Oh! A few months into my being in New York, I heard from another college friend [Louise], who was going to NYU Law School, which was unusual in those days. I did have two friends whose fathers were lawyers, of course. One was going to law school in Minnesota, and one was going to NYU.

INTERRUPTION

Wright: And so Louise called from Brooklyn and said, "I've found this crazy place on Horatio Street in the Village." I didn't know much about the Village. I'd been once with a beau to Nick's in the Village, and that was about the extent of my knowledge of the Village. Except that I knew it historically because of all the references. But I said, "Oh sure, let me come down." And I did. It was a full floor-through in a brick front house on Horatio Street that had just been redone. I

mean, the bathroom worked, although it was down three steps from the main floor, never mind that. It had a fireplace. And it had been a nursery school, [laughs] so that the floors were red linoleum, and the room that we would have a bedroom in had little cubbies for toys and books all around the edges. But that was fine. And there was one single bedroom, which you called the hall bedroom, and that we gave to Louise, because she was a student. We were just, you know, regular working people, but she needed her quiet. Ha! [laughs]

So there were eventually four of us in that apartment. I think it was about a hundred and twenty dollars a month, split four ways, and that was also very agreeable to all of us. Louise fancied herself a decorator, so she had the walls painted dark green with white trim, which was, in the early '50s very chic, I think. But the bedrooms were just plain old gray or white, whatever. It had plenty of light because it was the floor above the parlor floor. It was the second floor. Anyway, it was a wonderful place. And we found all kinds of furniture in the Salvation Army, and the junk shops on Bleecker Street, which were sort of antique shops, but very inexpensive, and we weren't going for lots of furniture, just a table. [00:24:59] The table looked like it had come from a church sitting room because it was long and skinny, but we could get quite a few people around there on stools and things like that. Anyway, it was great fun. And Louise, who'd engineered all this for us, because she was very knowledgeable, ran off and got married by Christmas time, much to her parents distress!

So that left three of us there. One was a registered nurse, who would ride her bicycle from Horatio Street to Presbyterian Hospital. That was nine plus miles, every day up the west side. And she still had time to take courses. She had a nursing degree but not a college degree. But she registered with The New School, and would spend weekends and nights going to classes at The New School. She was stimulating and fun, and she and I became very, very good friends. And then the girl from *Time* had Monday and Tuesday off, so there was not much friction there. We all were, you know, socially perfectly all right, meaning we didn't fight [laughs]. We weren't in distress in any way.

Dziedzic: So what sort of things were you doing socially, especially once you'd moved down here?

Wright: Oh, well, the woman that I became such good friends with, her father was an actor, and her stepmother was an actor. They lived just up the river near Nyack—Grand View, it was called. They had a little old Victorian house that looked down on the river, and we could go there any time. Oh! And I had a car. My benevolent grandmother had seen to it that I had a car, and we parked it on the street in Horatio Street.

What was I doing at that time? When did I change jobs? Oh, the Youth Hostels did not succeed in New York, really. They'd over-estimated how many GI's were going to want to bicycle [laughs] in Europe, I think. So I'd had to look for a job and went to my college—whaddayou call it. Not employment agency, but—

Dziedzic: The alumni office?

Wright: The alumni office. And she said, "Oh well, try schools." She said, "Nursery school doesn't require a degree." She said, "Do you have a teaching degree?" I said, "No." She said, "Well, teaching is a good thing to do." And it certainly was, because I'd been at camps and nursery schools and stuff before, but it wasn't a big deal for me.

Sorry—I've skipped a whole thing.

Dziedzic: You can go back if you like.

Wright: During those days on Horatio Street, going to social things, I had met a guy. He actually was the brother of the woman I was working with at the Youth Hostels. She was running their little magazine, called *Hosteling*, and I was helping her along with planning the trips. And I met her brother, who was a perfectly appropriate guy to go out with. He was an actor, and belonged to some club where you could go and watch his plays. And watching his plays one night was a young man that he'd kind of gone to college with. And so <u>that</u> young man started to call me up. He was in the advertising business, which is what <u>they</u> did—those young men that had graduated from college and majored in English, if they didn't get a job—

My roommate, a girl, had gotten a prime job. What were they called? At *Time*, you were not called a writer, you were called—it'll come—it's what the young women did who'd majored in English and were good writers.

Dziedzic: It was like an editor?

Wright: No. It was much lower-sounding than editor. But they did the writing.

Dziedzic: Maybe I'll remember this too. We'll both try to figure it out. [Note: a woman at *Time* would have the position of researcher rather than writer, even though she might also write; only men had the position of writer and the byline.]

Wright: Yes, somebody will know that [laughs]. Anyway, so I started to go out with the young advertising man and that seemed fine. [00:30:00]

Also, the job had changed. That's important to think of. So I'd gone back [to the alumni office] and she said, "Well, try schools." And there was a private school on Long Island called Buckley, a very proper school, that needed an assistant in the pre-school. So since I had my car, I picked up several teachers every day. One was in the Village, one I met by the Queensborough tunnel. It was my little taxi service for them to go out to Buckley. But the trouble was, I was only half-day, so they had to find their way home. But they loved the ride in the morning because it was easier. So that was fun and I got to know them. One was a middle-aged lady, and the other was a young woman, like me, and she taught the five-year-old group.

So I was with an older woman teaching the threes and fours. And I couldn't abide the way she talked to them. Very directorial and very sort of old-fashioned. Whereas, I knew the person who was teaching the fives, the younger person. They were singing and dancing and laughing, and that sort of thing. It broke my heart. There was one little three, who I think was a little too young for the rest of the group, and he couldn't get the zipper on his jacket. And she was going to let him go out without doing his zipper! So I managed to do the zipper.

By that time my husband and I—he was my husband by that time—had found a little place on Bank Street in the West Village—

I'm not threading this precisely.

Dziedzic: It's no problem. I can ask a question or you can pick up wherever you like.

Wright: Yes. Ask a question.

Dziedzic: Well, I am curious about how that frustration, seeing that older teacher, translated into changing jobs.

INTERRUPTION

Wright: The changing jobs.

Dziedzic: Getting married and changing jobs.

Wright: All right. But the changing jobs came first. So I drove out to Buckley on Long Island. I really liked that a lot. That was fun. And I lived on Bank Street by this time. Leonard and I had found a funny little house on Bank Street that was in the triangle between Bank and Hudson. There was no square angle in the house. There was no square thing. And it was small. It was much smaller than this one. It must have been eighteen feet wide. Eighteen or nineteen. Is that more classic? This is between twenty and twenty-one, this one. And the ones on Horatio Street were wider than that. They were bigger. So it's interesting.

But I loved the idea of living in the house. It was two stories on this little strange house. And the woman who lived downstairs was the daughter of a painter named Anne Ryan, who had just died. So our landlady was mourning her mother, unfortunately. But she had the two top floors for rent. So that was right. And she was happy to have young people come, and it was quite an agreeable arrangement. And that's an Anne Ryan [indicating an artwork hanging on the wall].

Dziedzic: Oh wow.

Wright: It's been in many a museum. It was given to me by the—and I don't have any papers to say who it was given to me by. That's really scary [laughs]. But anyway. Got distracted by that.

So they said, "Well, try the teaching." So I did. And because we happened to live on Bank Street, I knew about Bank Street College, where you could go to college. So I did. First, I

took one course and then I said, "Well this is what I really should do." [00:34:59] And I had to do student teaching in both the public schools and in private nursery schools, which was wonderful. I mean, I just loved it. Those were really good times for me. There was a school in Harlem, a kindergarten, with two wonderful women, who were the teachers. One older lady, meaning probably fifty, and one younger one about my age. And we all just got along famously. But interestingly enough, when the parents came, because I was white and they were Black, the parents would come to me first. And I said, "No, please go to Miss Green. She's the one." So I was learning a lot. I was learning a lot at Bank Street and learning a lot about the world in general. Anyway, those were really good times for me. And that went on for—

Dziedzic: Well, let me ask you another question.

Wright: Yes, okay.

Dziedzic: How did your husband and your family respond to you deciding that you were going to pursue this teaching?

Wright: Oh, by this time, I'm in my mid to late twenties, so nobody's going to—and, of course, my grandmother had originally started out as a teacher, so teaching was fine. She was getting pretty dotty by that time, but she was still alive. So they thought that was fine. That was very plus. And it was great to have to walk across the street. All I had to do was walk across Hudson Street and there was the school. But then I also had the student teaching. They called me to substitute a lot in Bank Street because I lived so close by, if someone was sick or couldn't come in. So I had a lot of extra classroom time observing first rate teachers. That was very nice. Very productive. That went on for several years. Yes.

Dziedzic: And what was their general approach at that time?

Wright: Bank Street was started by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who'd been one of these very active—Elisabeth Irwin, Lucy Sprague Mitchell were all devotees of John Dewey from the University of Chicago, and all the progressive movement. And oddly enough, in Ohio, because

there was a very well-to-do family who'd started a little school and hired one of those girls, and I'd gone to two years of nursery school with somebody, so it was all familiar to me. The teachers weren't babying you, they were teaching you the whole time. So actually, when it was time for me to go to public school they said, "Oh, put her in second grade, she already can read." I wasn't aware of all this happening at that time. That's what it was. So I skipped first grade.

Dziedzic: Was it typical for kids in your age to go to nursery school when you were young?

Wright: No. It was because this one family had started this school.

Dziedzic: That's what I thought.

Wright: It was called Country Day School. It was out on their farm, and they hired the teachers. We paid to go to the school, but it was okay, there was still enough money there for me to go to the school for the two years. Fours and fives it would have been, right? Threes, fours and fives? Because when I was five they put me in second grade (because I had already learned how to read in the nursey school). That was the tough one. I didn't know it was the tough one, but in the long thing of it I think—anyway, so I'd had a taste of that as a child. That was excellent. And I didn't have children at that time. So that went on and I [laughs], I didn't even finish my last class at Bank Street. It was very casual. You registered, you paid, and it was something like thirty dollars a point. A hundred dollars for a three-point class. Can you believe that? Just amazing. [00:39:59]

So I was going along very happily [laughs], and the husband was going along in the ad biz. And he had a crowd that was kind of fun to go out with. But when I saw *Mad Men*, I could tell you, by name, of the people I knew, who fit every one of those categories. It was not all nice. But anyway, that was the life that I was leading. And I had my own different friends and we all combined. It was good, quite social and nice. But unfortunately, my husband had not gotten the transfer that he wanted to the bigger, better agency, and he was very down in the dumps, and falling into the advertising crowd's problem of drinking too much.

So anyway, he was a good fisherman. He really loved fishing. Fly fishing. He tied flies, and that was one of his great loves. And I said, "Well I have a better idea, let's just take off. We can rent the apartment, with Elizabeth's permission, and go off and go to Florida in the winter, or

somewhere, and just do that." And he said, "Well, I have an even better idea." Because he had subscribed to an English fishing magazine for many years, and he said, "We will just quit everything and rent the apartment and go." So we did. And his friends gave him an Olivetti portable typewriter that was very chic at the time. It had just come out, that little smooth Olivetti. That was to encourage him.

And so we did. We sailed off from the foot of 23rd Street—that's the second time at 23rd Street—on a French ship called "the Flounder, the Flandre." It was not the Flounder, but we called it the Flounder. And again, he'd made his contacts, not as efficiently as Barbara had, but he had contacts in England. So we spent some time in England. And then his sister's husband was in the American Diplomatic Corp in Germany, in Bonn, which was handy. Oh! His family had great affinity to France. His younger sister had gone there for her junior year in college, and had married a Frenchman, and had never come back [laughs]. And his sister was with the American government in Bonn. So we did have good contacts. So we saw them in France, then we went to see Priscilla and Frank in Germany. Picked up a Volkswagen, which they'd arranged for us. It was a brand new 1949 Volkswagen. Its color was feldgrau in German, "field gray." [laughs] Very appropriate. But I loved that car. So we tied all our stuff—

Oh! By this time I was pregnant. So that was a complication, and my family did not like that at all, that I was going to do this, but tough noogies. Sorry about that one, we were going to do it anyway.

Dziedzic: How far along were you when you left?

Wright: About three months. Two or three months, I guess. And I remember seeing the obstetrician here that I'd seen to find out that I was pregnant. He was an old European doctor that was just wonderful. He said, "You know, they have babies in Europe too." So he sent me to a French doctor. We picked France as the place we would rather be, and so we did. We got a very, very famous—by some error, I think—guy who believed in—it wasn't called natural childbirth—accouchement sans douleur [Lamaze technique]. So we subscribed to him. But that wasn't going to be until summer, till August, September. [00:45:00] So we had the summer to figure out.

We found a little town in a province, in the Auvergne. It was just above the Auvergne. It was always called Lozère pays pauvre because it was in sort of a not very good area and agricultural stuff. But it was very hot for fishing. It had a famous river called the Tarn. T-a-r-n. It was a wonderful combination of rural France, and it was wonderful. They fixed us up with a funny little apartment that belonged to some seigneur who had an American wife, and really lived in the United States. He'd had this little guest cottage that somebody'd built for him, so we rented that. My husband fished, I kept on eating and growing the baby, and it was wonderful. That was a lovely time. The summer of 1958 by this time. We went to Europe just that spring, the spring of '58. So that was lovely.

And different American friends who were there—by this time they were couples, they weren't single girls or single guys. Oh sure, there were single guys, but many friends came to visit us there. That was fun. The house wasn't big enough to <u>have</u> them, so they had to go off and find [laugh] their own places. So it was a new little cottage. It had a sink, it had running water, it had hot water—chauffe-eau to heat the water. It was a good learning experience. And we could always eat at the local restaurant where we'd first stayed—we'd got friendly with the people who ran the B&B where we'd stayed. She was a fabulous cook, and Sunday was a pot au feu day where you'd get the whole thing. It was great.

Dziedzic: What happened then?

Wright: We'd had an appointment, of course, to go back to Paris towards the end of August because that was going to be the due date. So we did. We very reluctantly left and found an apartment in Paris in the 16th [arrondissement]—[pauses]. I didn't rehearse this in my mind before—sorry about that [laughs].

Dziedzic: That's okay.

Wright: And the doctor was a famous accouchement guy and dressed to the nines. Always the little cuffs were perfect, and he'd shoot the cuffs to give you these examinations [imitates the doctor adjusting his sleeves]. And the place that you went for your baby was called the Place du Belvédère and had been Napoleon's summer home on the edge of Paris. But you had to drive

there. So we had to go and find it, and be sure that we could get back and forth in the right time. It all worked out perfectly. And we were assigned a monatrisse [phonetic], so that she would do your counting and your breathing with you. Nothing could have been easier. I'm sorry to tell you that it was perfect [laughs]. I mean, I'm happy to tell you that it was totally [laughs] perfect. And it was a big baby girl, good size, everything fine. So that was excellent. You stayed for a week, and my mother, of course, flew over. And she could come and have lunch with us, and it could be served in the garden if you wanted. How's that? I think it cost much less than having a baby in New York City. Much less. It was incredible. All to our surprise. I mean, we weren't [laughs] necessarily looking for that. Anyway, it was wonderful.

And then we stayed in our apartment in Paris for—well, we weren't sure—until she was going to be old enough to do things. And everything went well. [00:50:00] I made an appointment with a pediatrician so that I wanted to be sure that she was all checked out after she was born. And then he said, "Why have you brought me this child. Is this child ill?" I said, "No." He said, "She's of a good weight. You don't need to bring this child to a doctor." They don't do that in Paris. Maybe they do now. But this was in 1958. So that was interesting.

But by—there was a gap—we left Paris. And did we go to have Christmas with my sister-in-law and brother-in-law in Germany? Well, Germany just loves Christmas. And they had four children. How they squashed us in there I have no idea. But we went to see them for the Christmas holiday. And of course they were going to pack up and go skiing shortly. Okay, so what should we do? We should go skiing too. So we went to a little town that they'd picked out. Americans, by this time they'd been in Germany several years, I think, and by this time they knew the perfect place to go. So we did. We went and found a little apartment with one of those big ceramic stoves. Do you know about the German stoves, the European stoves? It's like having a little furnace in your apartment.

Dziedzic: With the coal?

Wright: Did we have to do coal? No it was electric, I think, because you're high up. The name in Austria, it begins with "A." I'll have to get that for you, I'm sorry. It was another ideal, fabulous place and it was warm and cozy. And the baby carriage that we'd gotten at a French department store—whichever department store it was, I can't remember at the moment—folded

up, so that her bed was the buggy part, and she was just still small enough to be in the riding part of the baby carriage. So the wheels were on top of the car, but she was in the back seat of the Volkswagen, which folded down, and that was her compartment. And did we have a trunk with the wheels on top? I don't know. It was a sight to be seen. I think somewhere there are pictures of it.

So there was a little Austrian girl that I could hire that would come in the—well, I only went to one session for skiing a day. But my husband went twice. He was already an ace skier. They had the classes graded. It started in 6D, 6A, up to—and he was in 2A the first day. I was down in 6 somewhere because I'd really never skied before. I think maybe once in college, I had done it, but not really. So he would go off skiing two times, morning and afternoon, but come home for lunch.

There was a huge dairy on the way from the village to our little place up the hill, the mountain. So you'd get fresh milk all the time. Fresh eggs, all that sort of stuff. And there was a little town. The food was, you know, winter food in Europe, but good meat, so it was no problem. And the kitchen was perfectly—it was just a little wall kitchen. But that was okay. I'd certainly been used to those before. [laughs] Anyway, so that was ideal.

And then, her name was Waldtraut [phonetic], would come, and she was from a family of sixteen, I think. She was somewhere in the middle of the family, so she'd had plenty of experience with babies and everybody. And she would take the baby out in the little carriage. We have funny pictures of that. I don't know where they are now, but we have many. And I had to do the laundry by hand, wash the diapers and things by hand. You would put them out on the line that was out in the back, and they were frozen stiff. [00:55:02] And by the afternoon they were all limp [laughs]. So that was fun. Wonderful little experiences.

And then I'd have my ski lessons and I finally worked up to 4A so that I was really doing a fairly decent skiing by the time—well, because we'd stayed for, I think, six weeks, from early January into March. Just about the first of March. It was getting very crowded there. Well, in February, it was crowded too. But we had our little apartment, it was just great. And the family from Germany would come for weekends sometimes. They couldn't stay with us, but they came down, and their children. Well, their twins are five years older than my baby, so they were five, littler boys. And we have pictures of them learning to ski as well. So that was a very happy sort of family time and lots of people. We didn't meet many tourists—although there were plenty of

them—because we weren't staying in a hotel, we were living there. Anyway, that was an ideal thing.

Dziedzic: When did you come back to New York?

Wright: In June. So that's a long time. What did we do in the meantime? Oh, we did go to Spain. That was the time that Spain then in the winter was pretty cold, but we could go down to the south coast. So that was a new adventure, where we also rented a little house. I have to look it up on the map. I didn't get in my mind up to this point. I'm sorry [laughs]. Anyway, we spent the spring in Spain, which was very good for trout fishing, as you can imagine, and it was one place where we went almost to the east coast of Spain. Portugal comes in there but then you have some part of Spain that's way over on the—and you had get permission from Franco, of course, to go to Spain.

That was the complication with Spain when Barbara and I went. There were no youth hostels, and besides it was a hostile government, basically. But this time, you could write to them and pay them for the fishing rights for a certain time. Take it for ten days, something like that. It was short. A week at a time, several days at a time. It was on the northern part of Spain. She's sitting in a field, so that was springtime. That's where we eventually went to. And that was pleasant, but she'd gotten a cold. And that was scary. But there was a doctor there, so that was okay.

By that time I think that we were both ready to start to think about going home. Did we go back to Paris? Sure, we did, but didn't stay, and we went pretty quickly from there back to London. We had to go to London to get the flight back. It wasn't a flight. Did we take a boat? Yes, we took a boat. Yes, of course. And we took Holland-America home, and they had the dock on Morton Street. [laughs] So we took a cab home from Morton Street. What had happened to the car? The car was being shipped, because we had that car here, the Volkswagen.

Dziedzic: And you were still on Bank Street at the time, in the house on Bank Street?

Wright: Yes, yes. And they had left and the curtains were gone. I don't know what happened to the curtains. It was okay, nobody cared. And Elizabeth, the landlady, was glad to have us back.

Yes, that was before the other baby, of course. Yes, we just had her and that was good. And my mother came, of course. Well, she had come when she was born, but that wasn't much fun. [01:00:01]. This was much more fun. So that's the way it went when we came back, and then there was going to be another baby, and he got born [laughs]. And then '66 is when we came here to this house. By that time, we could get it all together. My husband went back and got jobs and did the right thing. They were interested in him because he dared to do that, to quit the business. They thought he had something else. But he also had the booze. Not so good.

Dziedzic: So when you came back, how did you figure out how this teaching career that you'd been studying for was going to work with you having—

Wright: Because I'd been in touch with Bank Street. I'd had to send them some of my papers [laughs] on the way back. And the woman who was running Bank Street School had not been a classmate, but had gone to Vassar as well, and was somebody I knew very well. She wasn't necessarily a big help [laughs], but you know it was a big contact. And then I did, indeed, succeed in finishing the last paper, and got a degree! And nursery schools, of course, weren't required to have a degreed teacher, I think, if you were in a school that had other degreed teachers. Is that right? But by this time—when did we start the nursery school? Sixty—

Dziedzic: Two.

Wright: '62. So we came back. And yes, he was a baby-baby. He was, you know, just this kind of a baby [indicating a baby you can cradle in your arms]. And sitting in the park with her was where I would meet other mothers, and I'd say, "What nursery school are you going to?" That was when we came back, right?

SIDE CONVERSATION

We came back in '59. He was born in '61. So '59 to '61 was when I was sitting in the park. And that was very boring and I still had to deal with Bank Street because I was still sending in my—because I hate to write things. So they said, "Yes. There's Little Red [School House], or

Bank Street itself." And that was full and expensive. And the people I was meeting in the park were not all expensive.

One of the jobs that I'd had in that time between when I lived at the little house—Bank Street would get me jobs, and one of them was at a co-op nursery school. A couple of them were. They were popular in those days. There'd be a teacher, and the mothers would be the assistants. And I said, "We could do that here." So I spoke to my advisor at Bank Street, and she said, "Oh, I think I know of a place." It was this place on Horatio Street. Oh, my eyes lit up about Horatio Street; it was the school that had sold the house that I lived in.

They'd had three buildings and it was run by one of those nice organizations that does good. During the war, they were running a nursery school for working mothers of service people. And there were plenty of those here. And that's where they'd done some of their work, because they had Bank Street teachers working in nursery schools. But they finally weren't having enough, so they didn't need the third building. So they'd sold that one house. And one of the women that I'd talked to knew a real estate dealer and she said, "Yes, I know who owns that house." And so she helped us do that. And he agreed that he would sell it to this group that had been working at Masters Center, which was the original school group. It was like Henry Street. What do you call a group like Henry Street?

Dziedzic: The Henry Street Settlement? [01:05:00]

Wright: Yes. Only this was just a nursery school that these women from Westchester in the '30s bought. They bought the three houses on Horatio Street and made the little cubbies and the linoleum floors. And it was all just fine for the children of the working mothers, but then the fathers came back and there weren't so many working mothers anymore. They'd all gone to Long Island and New Jersey for better lives.

Dziedzic: And the kids didn't need nursery school anymore.

Wright: Well, they'd moved out. It was mostly young people like us taking up those cheap apartments, as I had done. And I actually knew that that building had been okayed for a nursery school, which was a huge, big plus. The furnace was in the right place. It has to be encased in

cement and things like that. All kinds of things that you wouldn't know about, but I knew that it had been okayed. So that was a big plus. And so from—I'm trying to think of the dates.

It was really amazing. The people that were moving here, some of them were buying houses, so they had enough money or their parents had enough money. Anyway, we raised the ten thousand dollars down payment. I mean, the nursery school could give us the figures for this if we needed. But it was ten thousand down, and we raised it in something like four months, with our families and friends. I think we had little fairs that raised fifty cents [laughs] or whatever. But we managed to do that. So it was a group of women who were dying [to start a nursey school in the neighborhood]. I think a lot of them not fully employed because they had their young children. It was just the time of the world where it was wonderful to have been able to do that. It all came together in a wonderful way.

It was early '60s, before the war was important. And well, the government—in the Masters Center, which we were linked to, they were allowing us to use their backyard and all their stuff. We didn't have to give up the backyard to play yet. We could still use it and they would get—I remember when we were—

Wait a minute. I've gotten this mixed up, so we're gonna have to go back. I really taught in that nursery school at Masters before we bought the building.

SIDE CONVERSATION

Dziedzic: Okay, so one of the Horatio Street buildings was a school where you finally got your nursery school [the West Village Nursery School] set up. Is that right?

Wright: First, we had to organize it, and that was when the women all came together, dressed up in their very nice clothes, and went to meet the Masters ladies from Westchester County. And they agreed that they would allow us to use the nursery school room at Masters. I went and I taught there, I think, for two years. I had a babysitter for my little girl, who was fine, because she was too young. She was under two. And we taught there, in the original Masters, in their nursery school room.

Dziedzic: At that point was it the West Village Nursery School or was it you and the other mothers [working informally]?

Wright: No. Well, I think we called it the West Village Nursery School because we had to have permission for the mothers to come in the room. They all had to have their TB tests. Of course, the parents were running the business part of it. It was that kind of a co-op, and they hired the teacher. They had a first teacher who was wonderful and everybody adored her. But then I think she was either pregnant, or got married, or moved away. [01:10:00] So that's when I stepped in. I said, "Well, I could get a babysitter and do the half-day." And I was qualified. By that time, I'd finally [pants a little] passed all my papers.

And I guess that's when my advisor said, "Oh, you're starting this co-op nursery school." And I said, "Yes, we want to, but there's a building down here that is now privately owned and has a big backyard. We looked at that and decided it was just too far west." That was west of Washington Street. Finally my advisor said, "I think I know that Masters is going to give up their nursery school." And that's when we were able to take over the nursery school, but sponsored by Bank Street. And we had an advisor who came a couple of times a year and observed, and gave ideas and things like that. And everybody had loved that first teacher that we'd hired. But then she was not available anymore. I can't remember why. And that's when I stepped in, while it was still at Masters.

Dziedzic: And this would be before there was fundraising?

Wright: Oh, no. Well, before there was funding—we did go two years, and the parents loved it, that they were in the classroom, and it had worked out well. You had to train the parents. You know, I had mother A and mother B, and what their different chores were on different days. And then we'd have parent meetings to discuss what was going on. That was sort of more quarterly, I would say, that sort of thing. And they were doing the business part of the school. I didn't have to think about any of those things, [whispering] which would have been a disaster.

Dziedzic: So you mentioned this a little bit, but I'll ask you again directly. You and some of the other mothers that you're meeting are at the park, and you're talking about starting, or where to find a nursery school. What was the motivation for wanting a nursery school?

Wright: Oh, because there weren't many. And I said, "Well, I know about ones that are co-ops. They're in different parts of town." There was one up in the Bronx that I just loved. It was in a housing project. Those parents loved doing that, and it was great for their children. That was when I substituted there for half a year or something before the baby came, before we went away. So I'd had experience.

Dziedzic: And were the mothers interested in the kind of education and experiences that their kids could have? Or were they interested also in picking up their own career pursuits that they had had maybe before they had kids? Looking for some independence?

Wright: Mostly interested in the childcare part. And it was going to be inexpensive because they would have to put in so much time. It was really a plus on both those things. For me, the emphasis was on the parents learning. I thought it was fabulous for them to be in the classroom. And it's terribly hard for the teacher—I don't want to say it's terribly hard—but you have to have a certain looseness so that you can manage that. And indeed, there are always times when you have somebody who's very difficult, and you have to deal with it. But rarely, in this kind of a thing. It all worked out.

Dziedzic: You would be managing the kids and also—

Wright: —the parents. When you're supposed to be teaching the parents. Or they're supposed to be observing. And then, of course, you turn up, in those parents, individuals who then go back to school themselves—several of those. Two people who went on to—well, Paula is one.

Dziedzic: And when you talk about the parents in the classroom, were there just mothers?

Wright: Oh, occasionally there'd be fathers. Oh yes, there was one father who was an artist, who—Barbara [Williams], one of the best teachers, you know, she was just crazy about this guy [laughs]. Of course, he's thirty years younger than she is, that sort of thing. But she said, "Oh, I can't wait till"—what was his name? [Speaking wistfully] "Oh, it's his day today." He was an artist. And the woman worked, so you got him, which is sometimes the case. And then there was the guy who came from way down in Soho on the bicycle with his little boy. [01:15:01] And he just didn't have a clue about what to do in the classroom, but he was so dear to his son, that you just loved it when he was on. You could just sit him in a corner and he'd do something with one or two kids that was just right. So you got to like people a lot.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about the other founding mothers of the school. Can tell me who they were and a little bit about them?

Wright: Yes, the ones that I found in the park. Well, one was one I knew anyway, Anne Tonachel. She was a personal friend whose older daughter was a little older than my daughter. About two years older. And she was already going to St. Luke's [School], I think. And then she had a younger daughter, who was just a baby still. And she was a teacher. She was a history teacher at Music & Art for many years. So she was one of the working mothers who was thrilled to have—and she was just thrilled to take off the day to be in the classroom with her child. That was just fun. And her husband was a lawyer, so he was a very prominent parent in the business part.

Then there was Barbara Williams. She was one of the ones who went right back to school and got her degree from Bank Street, only to take over and be the director. Well, teacher-director. She was great. Her husband was *60 Minutes*, very successful in television. And it was her third child. So her others were in school and then came along this little one, who needed nursery school badly [laughs]. So by the time he was finished being a student, she was almost ready to be the teacher-director. So that was very fortunate. And who else? Well, those were the founders. And another woman who has dropped away. I don't know whether she's died or not. Maybe has. But those were the two prominent ones I can think of now. Both gone.

Dziedzic: I have two other names. Maybe you can correct me.

Wright: Yes.

Dziedzic: Dori Kimball and Kate Brown. How are they involved?

Wright: Dori! Kate Brown is one of the original founders, and Kate's the one that sort of disappeared. We did find her for the fiftieth anniversary, but has since gone away.

And Dori Kimball, of course. My gosh! I mean—Dori went to Radcliffe. Had all the vigor. And it was her third child? Yes, it was her Suzie. Suzie Kimball. Suzie Kimball came with her.

SIDE CONVERSATION

Wright: Anyway, Dori was very vigorous, as was Barbara. Less vigorous, but very prominent. And they all became personal friends. Dori died a little while ago. They're all gone now. She was very ambitious for her children. She wanted the right thing, and she was going to attain it. And she, of course, was the treasurer. She was just typical of—she should have had a job. Barbara was a social worker before, so that fitted in very nicely with her thing, and Anne was a teacher before. So Dori, I think she was not really a business woman before. I don't remember what she did before, but she had older children, so she'd been a mother for a long time. And Suzie was her little baby at the very end. [laughs] [01:20:00] Susie was wonderful. And Susie's grown up and had all boys [laughs]. Anyway, they were all very vigorous, and it wouldn't have existed without those people, ever. To organize.

Dziedzic: It sounds like when you all got together there was nobody better than the five of you to make this happen.

Wright: Right. And enough of them I think. Kate's husband was a lawyer, too. But I think maybe she had a divorce. I think that's why she left town. But she's the one that faded away, but we did find her for the fiftieth. And the others were all here for the fiftieth. It was wonderful.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about how you all figured out what you needed to do to establish a proper school.

Wright: Part of that had come because I'd worked at the co-op school, and I could talk to their people. But Bank Street was really the one that engineered—through Barbara and Dori. Dori's kids had gone to Bank Street too, I think? Well, no, they'd gone to St Luke's. So she was in it sort of because she liked the traditional stuff. But it was a mix though, of that group.

And the Department of Health. Why did I know about the Department of Health? Because Bank Street and had wanted to have one of their nursery schools further downtown nearer to Henry Street, and was helping Henry Street set one up. Henry Street found a place, and I was to be the teacher. So they'd done all the set up about that, but I'd learned a lot about that. So we went to Bank Street to help us get the right people at the Department of Health. It was very important to get the right people and to talk to them because they had to inspect and do that sort of thing. They had to tell you how high the toilet was, how you'd have to have the closed doors, and all the rules and regulations. So my experiences was with the one that we at least tried to start at Bank Street. Those parents were just glad to have their kids doing something. And those were kids who would take a kids book, and they didn't know what was up or down. They had never looked at a book. I mean, it was excruciating.

And of course, I did have an assistant. They didn't stick me in there alone with fifteen kids [laughs]. But it was very interesting. It only lasted one semester, and they were not able to get it together, to get a real nursery school of that kind. Because the parents either wanted to go right back—my parents didn't necessarily have to go back to work. Although many of them did, several of them went to education classes, they continued that, or went back to other careers.

Dziedzic: When you say "my parents" do you mean parents of the kids you were teaching?

Wright: Yes, in the nursery school. Well, that wouldn't have been just a couple of years. It was typical of the kind of people who came to the nursery school. And some with much less education than others, but they saw how good it was for their children. They did. They really understood that.

Dziedzic: So let's talk about that a little bit. So the school's opened and you're teaching, right? How did it start out? Did it start out with different age groups. How were the programs?

Wright: No. We started with threes. That was the beginning age. And then they had to be four, so you had to have a second room. And that's when the urge to buy the building came. And I knew that the building next door was zoned! So that was a stroke of luck. But they all snapped to and got the money, and then we were able to do—oh, the second group would come. The fours were always in the afternoon. The twos were in the morning, and the fours were in the afternoon. We didn't have to have two rooms right away. But then as the school grew and they bought the building, they saw that they could do the second floor as well, and have them at the same time [01:25:02]. Have the fours go afternoons.

That's when they started the twos. It was a program that Bank Street had started with mothers and children. At Bank Street, it was in the basement and they had the room, but they had two doors open to another big room, where the parents sat at a round table. So the children could go from the nursery. This is the twos—they're just barely walking—and they could go and see their mommy anytime. But then they wanted to come back into the nursery school. And the mothers were discussing with the Bank Street faculty. It wasn't just anybody, it was the early childhood specialists. That was the twos program. And I actually, at Bank Street, taught that one year, which was interesting. I'd forgotten about that.

Dziedzic: Were you teaching in addition to teaching at—

Wright: No. This is before the nursery school got going. So my contacts with Bank Street were pretty constant.

Dziedzic: So once you were able to buy the building, then you expanded to—how many age groups?

Wright: Just two age groups.

Dziedzic: Okay.

Wright: And then Barbara, who by that time had gone back to school and gotten her degree from Bank Street, she wanted to do the twos. She knew of the Bank Street twos program, and she wanted to start it. [laughs] And they went over to St. John's Church up 11th Street. You know, the Episcopalian Church has a nice church hall. We used to have a girl scout troop in there many years ago. And so they took that for their little guys. And I never went to it myself. And Barbara was quite an expert on the little ones by that time.

Dziedzic: And she did that independently?

Wright: No, it was part. That was the third group, and that came after a number of years. That wasn't right away by any means.

Dziedzic: Okay. So it would have been affiliated with the West Village Nursery School.

Wright: And the school will be able to tell you when it started with Barbara.

Dziedzic: Okay. So it was affiliated with the West Village Nursery School.

Wright: Oh, yes. You could start with the twos program and pretty much go on the way. And so that often became the draw for the twos program. Aha! We can go to nursery school for two more years if we join the twos! Which is always good, but that wasn't the reason for it. The reason for it was to educate the mothers, and the parents, whatever. Now you'd have to ask someone else about the dates.

Dziedzic: So between the West Village Nursery School, which is up and running, and Bank Street, which, you know, is also up and running, it seems like there were a lot of options. Suddenly, there were more options for parents who were interested in nursery school in this part of the city. Do you have a sense, when you look back, when did it seem like some of the students in the school started to be from other neighborhoods around the city?

Wright: Well, Soho was one—I sort of hesitate to say the artists community, but people who pick up on things and say, "Oh that sounds interesting. Let's try that." So Soho became one of the places that people came from—that nice daddy. And then there was the East Village, which had Little Red. They didn't have a threes program. I think they had a fours, fives maybe, but I'm not positive about that. And [First] Presbyterian [Church Nursery School] was just beginning. It was after ours. And I don't know about the east side because this was mostly a west side thing. A few parents were from the east side, and at one point it got kind of—they wanted it to be more east side. And those of us over here knew that there were plenty of people. [01:29:57]

Dziedzic: What is the reason for that?

Wright: Well, I don't know. Most of us who lived in the west village thought we could, without pulling from way down, just have enough here, because it was filling up with people. Also, it was becoming a little more pricey. At first, it was not at all pricey to live here. It was rag tag, a little bit. Whereas the other schools, they didn't want to be rag tag. We wanted to be a decent school that fulfilled what we wanted to do, which was have the parents be active and learn from the situation.

Dziedzic: So by east side, you mean more Upper East Side than Lower East Side?

Wright: Yes, it was moving across Fifth Avenue. That's the NYU crowd. And by that time, Presbyterian had started up. And that's much more dressy [laughs]. I'm going to erase all that.

Dziedzic: We'll transcribe everything and you'll have a chance to look at it.

Wright: Yes. Actually, somebody who taught for us for a while went to First Presbyterian, one wonderful woman. Anyway, so we've had great teachers.

Dziedzic: How long were you teaching there?

Wright: Off and on for fifteen years, I suppose. I don't know. I left though to go to VCS [Village Community School]. That was when I moved up to fives, from threes. That was a big adventure. And actually, I loved that very much. I was only gone for two years and then I came back to the nursery school.

Dziedzic: Sounds like you answered this but were there ever any issues with getting students to enroll in the school?

Wright: No, not till more recently. And I'd have to ask somebody else about that. I forgot to ask. There is a woman, Tory Ruffalo. Have you come across her? She used to live on Horatio Street. Her children went to the nursery school, and she was a teacher before. And she became a director after Paula, who was after me, who was after Barbara.

Dziedzic: So once you started teaching, was there ever any revision of how you were going to run the classrooms, or how you were going to run the school?

Wright: Well, the revision came when we bought the building and then they had to renovate not just the downstairs room. And then another year later or so—I don't know how much later—they did the upstairs room, which is the big parlor floor, which was where we had fives. I taught fives there, didn't I? [laughs] Anyway, yes we did. We had wonderful fives there. That was great fun. Again, I'd have to check that. Isn't that funny? I was reviewing all this and then I think I stopped by the time they bought the building, and I didn't go into the details after that. Maybe because I was less involved with the building part of it than I was with the teaching part of it.

No, the style has tried to persist. They have people there now, I assume. They have one assistant, a young woman, who never—well, what did Debbie do? Well, Debbie just kept on teaching at the West Village Nursey School. She was one of the mothers. She didn't go back to school. She's a New Englander. You don't tell her what to do, you just wait and see what she's going to do. [laughs] She's wonderful and she's still teaching over there. And what was that about. It started about Debbie. So that's a long term person who has devoted, basically, the rest of her life to the school.

Dziedzic: And you said the style has persisted over the years.

Wright: Oh yes.

Dziedzic: How would you describe the style? [01:34:56]

Wright: [long pause] [laughs] I don't have the words for it right now.

Dziedzic: You're just doing it for so many years it's hard to put it into words.

Wright: Well, right. And it comes from John Dewey and those ladies that started the progressive schools. And more nursery schools do this now. I don't know about the Upper East Side, I've had nothing to do with them. I did go back one time and it was a nursery school whose name you'd know. They were looking for a threes or fours teacher, I can't remember. And I could no more have taught there than fly to the moon. It was much too Upper East Side for me. We wanted to keep a casual style, but still adhere to the nursery school principles of the old-fashioned, progressive school. And it's pretty standard, except not necessarily in the public school system yet.

Dziedzic: And that's really around centering the child's—

Wright: Development. Child development is the most important. That's the most important. Where the child is. You don't make a three-year-old—I can't even think of any examples now.

Dziedzic: Well, maybe zipper their own coat.

Wright: Yes, right!

Dziedzic: You can help them with their own coat. And then you can have them draw whatever they like to draw.

Wright: Oh right, right. You tell them not to pour it on the floor and to be tidy as you can. I mean, it's installing some values—I wouldn't use the word values, no. Routines is better.

Dziedzic: Mmm-hm. Was there ever any kind of push-back to the approach that the school had?

Wright: Not that I know of. Perhaps later. I don't think so because it still continues in the way that I would have done. And it depends on who is the—they have a male director now. They got an experienced teacher from a school that didn't exist in the early days. It's now a going school. It even goes through the grades. But he was a pre-school teacher and they seem to like him a lot. I think that's really great. I don't go back and visit anymore. I just have friends of some of the, not current people—well, they're current people. Tori's a current person. I think her grandchildren are young. Yes, the ones that I worked with are having grandchildren now.

Dziedzic: Speaking *very* broadly, in the mid-to-late '60s there was a lot more focus on—well, lots of things—but one of those things being early child education and child development. I'm thinking of the Children's Television Workshop, and Head Start starting, and things like that.

Wright: Right.

Dziedzic: What kind of impact did those things have?

Wright: Well, I remember they called me up—Sesame Street—and said they wanted to bring some materials down. And I said, "In what sense?" And I turned them down. I didn't like the kind of thing they might do and I didn't want that for our school. I thought that was too pushy. I didn't like everything that they did, so they never came. I think they had their own program and that's fine. But we had a different—not different, but our agenda was the parents being involved in their children's education. In the children's learning, I would say. And it was based on stages of development. That was what you got from Bank Street, development. And you don't do the things that are not going to work with that age group.

And you have to know your age group. [01:40:00] I think that it was going to be too much programmed learning that I didn't—I really told them, no, that we didn't want to do that right now, and I don't think they ever did. I don't know if they ever called back. Because that was in the later days. We were already in the new building. I was probably doing the fives. That would have been in the mid-sixties, something like that. They didn't appeal to me at first.

Dziedzic: Were there some other things that were going on in the mid-to-late '60s that changed the school?

Wright: [Laughs] Well, it was the [Vietnam] War. It was an unsettled time. I remember going to a friend's. Well, her kids had already graduated from the nursery school, but they were in elementary school, and she was listening to the Beatles. And I'd barely heard of the Beatles. I mostly listened to WQXR, although I'm not a classical music person necessarily. And she said, "Oh, but it's so fun!" [laughs] And one of the teachers who was my child's fives teacher at the nursery school—she was a gifted teacher. Oh, she was wonderful. She worked the Beatles into her curriculum. They made a Yellow Submarine. They painted some paper and pretended that they were—oh, it was just great. I mean, he's never forgotten it. Anyway, it was loosening up, I think, but still age appropriate. That happened to be age appropriate.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask, too, about the next decade. Let's say the financial crisis in the city.

Wright: Oh, the '70s.

Dziedzic: Yes. Did that have any kind of impact on the school? Or if not, then what things did impact the school?

Wright: Oh, I'd have to get somebody who's younger and went with us longer. I didn't retire until the '80s, so I should be remembering these things. I'd almost have to look at the rosters of—I still have all the class lists of the ones that I taught, to remember things. Unfortunately, I don't remember them distinctly in those days. You should talk to somebody. If you want to expand that, I can talk to some of the other directors. I can talk to Paula, who lives up the street,

who's a dear friend. And Tori, who's also a good friend. She doesn't come to town much anymore. She had three girls—a set of twins and a single girl—grandchildren within a month of each other. Two daughters—one had twin girls, and the other had a single girl. So she's been taking care of them. Two families.

Dziedzic: Well, really, I think what I want to ask is—

Wright: I'm sorry. I'm blanking out now. I'm sorry.

Dziedzic: Well, that's fine, because I can just ask a different question. What I really want to know about is <u>your</u> history and what you do remember of the school?

Wright: Well, it was a fabulous opportunity for me. And I loved what I did every day, maybe to the detriment of my children, who knows. Because there were <u>lots</u> of evening phone calls—that was about the business part, often. And got wonderful support from not just the teachers that worked there, but their families. If their children had had a happy time there, their husbands were only too happy to work for the nursery school's good. I'd have to go on and speak to Paula and Tori, I think, to go on down. Even though I was there until the '80s. But by that time, I wasn't a classroom teacher anymore, I was the director. [01:44:59]

Dziedzic: Right. So what was your job like as the director?

Wright: Not so much fun. [laughs]

Dziedzic: That's why you had the evening phone calls.

Wright: Yes, yes. Indeed. There were factions in the school. I'm thinking the east siders. Those people east of Fifth Avenue, east of Sixth Avenue. There was a group of them. I don't know what they wanted to do, but they were eager to elect their members and it didn't seem quite—but fine, it all passed. Everybody was okay. I don't think people resented too much. Resented, why would

they? I mean, they could come to the school or not come to the school. The school was trying not to change too much, I think. It's very conservative. Whole thing.

Dziedzic: It's not that the school was conservative, right?

Wright: No, no. That's the wrong word [laughs]. I enjoyed it all, everything, wonderful. Good friends. But I'm very vague now on what happened [laughs] when I was director. Obviously, I didn't enjoy it nearly so much as I enjoyed the teaching part.

Dziedzic: Do you recall what were the kind of main things that you did as the director? I would imagine fundraising would be a big part of it.

Wright: Yes, that was not in my métier. There were wonderful people who would bubble up from the parent body. And they got to having very fancy entertainment. The annual party, which used to be at somebody's house and backyard, had grown to have a venue and big fundraising. No, I missed all that. That was after me, basically, I think. And I think the building's all finished and paid for.

Dziedzic: And as a result of it being cooperatively run, you would have been dealing with different parents every few years, is that right?

Wright: Oh, yes. Oh, you missed some people horribly if they'd been very active and very effective. And then you always tried to have somebody who was a community member to keep one of those people still coming to the board meetings. I know VCS does that. So VCS came after. They started in '70. And I got very involved with that, with the starting at VCS. I think I was probably doing more than I was for the nursery school at that point. Anyway.

Dziedzic: Can you talk a little bit more about that school?

Wright: The Village Community School? Well, it was started from scratch very quickly as well. It was when Bank Street decided that they were going to pull out. Sheila Sadler was her name.

They lived on Horatio Street [laughs], but not near the Nursery School, in a different block. And her kids were too old. Her kids are a little older than mine. I know one's the same age. They're both ages of my older two. Anyway, she was straight Bank Street, and was the director of Bank Street School. And they said they were going to take the bid from Columbia to build their own school up there. So she got to work and she was some fantastic organizer.

Then she had me going to all the local schools telling them that they weren't going to be competitors to St. Luke's. I remember the St. Luke's one, particularly, because I knew so many parents at St. Luke's too. Our kids would go to St. Luke's, to Bank Street, and increasingly, to P.S. 3. Some of our parents were involved in the starting of P.S. 3. Talk about getting involved in education. And P.S. 41 was another big popular one. More traditional parents wanted 41, the less traditional parents wanted P.S. 3. And Westbeth was huge, huge (along with parents from the West Village Houses). That was after we were in our own building [01:50:03]. But they were huge supporters of our school—treasurers and things like that that did my work probably [laughs]. And fundraising. They were all great at fundraising, the Westbeth people. So there were many reasons for us not to move further east or further south. The south worked better than east in my mind. I hope I didn't make people do that!

Dziedzic: Well, there would have been a community of artists. People who had to figure out creative ways for money.

Wright: Yes, right.

Dziedzic: Who had kids at that particular time.

Wright: And loved having kids at the school. Oh, there were little tiffs between different factions, but they all knew that that was a great school for them, particularly the Westbeth people. But I don't want to put it all on Westbeth, because there were many people from all over. And then again, drawing from the south, once we'd gone to Soho—Soho on this side because it would have been too far for the others.

Yes, I wanted my grandchild to be able to come to the nursery school, but they live on West 86th Street. It would not have been correct for the child or anything else. Your friends in nursery school are usually around you. But that's okay.

Dziedzic: Did you have your own kids in your classroom?

Wright: No! Oooh, no. When Alexander was three, I took a couple of years off. Did I? I would have to look.

Dziedzic: I guess when you were working with the Village Community School that would have been later. Your son would have been nine, or ten?

Wright: No. He went all the way through, from beginning to end of Village Community School.

Dziedzic: Oh, he attended Village Community School?

Wright: He attended the nursery school, then Village Community School.

Dziedzic: Okay.

Wright: So I was not in the classroom. I could have been in a different classroom. I could have been in the fours classroom when he was in the threes, and opposite the other. And besides, the fives were there by that time. I would have to find out when the fives started. He attended the fives at the nursery school, and got that wonderful teacher, Thea. I don't know where she's gone. She kind of "myst-appeared." I think she had children.

Dziedzic: And so you stayed involved from those early days and early '60s until the 1980s, you said.

Wright: Mmm-hm.

Dziedzic: So what was that like to step away from the West Village Nursery School?

Wright: Oh, terrible. Don't ever retire. But that was nice. I still have some good friends who are involved in it. But I don't know the current parents very well. That's the trouble.

Dziedzic: Can you go into a little more detail about why it was hard?

Wright: Well, you don't sort of have the everyday push, and I guess I still had plenty of energy and stuff like that. We had a tennis group [laughs] with some of the old—the originators. What did I do all those times? Oh! Well, through one of the old parents, just on the telephone, I was hired by Hunter College. That was in the '90s so there would still have been a couple years there where I was not employed particularly. And I was a supervisor for student teachers at Hunter for, well, almost ten years. And I loved that. That was really a great way to retire because it gave me something.

I never had much to do with public schools except for 41 and number 3. And they were such an interesting contrast. You know, you had everything you ever wanted in public schools. This one is traditional. [01:54:56] It goes one, two three, four and the other one was—I don't know if it still is. Although, there were some excellent teachers in both schools. Actually, a couple of VCS teachers had taught in 41 before.

Anyway, I just loved the young people who came. They gave me grad students. One year they gave me undergrads, and that was not a good match for me. That was very interesting—they were not much different than the nursery school because you had to give them much direction in several ways. But the grad students—one had been a fashion model, two were police officers, a man and a woman. This is over the years. They were both fabulous, the police officers. And the children. "Oh, Mr. C," they'd say. They would do anything for Mr. C. Fourth graders. Talk about born into command. Anyway, it was a wonderful variety of young people getting their Masters at Hunter.

Dziedzic: In teaching all ages?

Wright: In education. All ages [in elementary education]. I got to see upper classes, and I got to go to see sixth grade. Never junior high, because these were people for elementary years. Anyway, so that was a wonderful way for me to finish off. I loved that. I shall never forget that. It was great. And that was through a parent connection from Westbeth, and we did it over the phone. I talked to her. And she was also from Ohio, originally. She said, "Oh you sound good. Okay." [laughs] So we did that.

Dziedzic: Well, let's talk a little about the neighborhood then. When did you move to this home here?

Wright: '65. From the little house. Whew! No, Alexander was born after I got here. And there's a one-floor rental downstairs, which is now occupied by my grandchild. That's sort of for me, I think, to keep someone in the house. So it's three floors, which we didn't really even use at first. This is the living room floor, living-dining, and then the three bedrooms upstairs. And since I had the two kinds of kids, that was all right. The boy, who was younger, got the hall bedroom, never mind. That was called the icebox or something [laughs] because it doesn't have as good heat as the other one. And hers had the end of the fireplace, which was not hooked up. I mean, she couldn't do anything. But she said [whispering] "I always/almost had a room with a fireplace."

Dziedzic: And what was the block like when you moved here?

Wright: Oh, well, yes. It was a rough block. Convicted murderers lived across the street. They killed some gay guy in the park, with chains. And they're younger [softly] but I haven't seen family for a long time. But I think the younger brother of the murderer still walks dogs in the neighborhood. So there's somebody in the family. Maybe he inherited the apartment in one of the buildings over there. So it was a rough crowd, but it was an interesting crowd.

There were Spanish, from the Spanish Civil War. There was a restaurant that was on the corner—it was a deli—and the wife was Spanish, and the man was Portuguese. And they had every known pasta in the world. When the lights all went out one night, I didn't have any pasta left. Because I had a gas stove, I could use that stove, and I went and got some exciting [laughs]

new pasta and with canned tomatoes [laughs]. That was when the electricity went. That was an interesting time. But that's not germane to the nursery school.

Dziedzic: Well, it's germane to the neighborhood, I think. You're talking about the blackout [of 1977]?

Wright: Well that was the first blackout. Then there was a second blackout, which was not quite so scary. I don't know why. [02:00:00] But the first one was really scary, in that we couldn't see. I got as far as the deli. And you'd see the lights down there that went out, and then your lights went out. So we did have a lot of pasta. [laughs] But anyway, that was interesting.

And the next door neighbors are very interesting. It's a Croatian family. Italian-Croatian or whatever because it's up there in that corner. They basically spoke Italian, and went to the local Catholic school, which was St. Veronica's. You know where that is. Their youngest boy was seventeen when I moved in. He's now in his mid-seventies, closer to eighties, I guess. And he's the only one left. He was this big, burly guy. Always nasty, always mean. There's a chain link fence between me and them. It's now covered over with a very nice one, but it was chain-link. And I planted little ivy seedlings along the fence, so that I thought, "Oh, the ivy will get lovely. I won't have to look at the chain-link fence." He pulled up every seedling. Okay. So we didn't do that anymore.

And then the old man and his wife lived on the top floor. Both were heavy, and it made me so sad. She was very sweet, and always said good morning, and how are you, and things like that. They used the whole house. And the one who has it now was seventeen, he was still going to high school around here somewhere. And he's very plain now, and dressed nicely. He's clean and not a bum at all. But I think he's dying of cancer because there were cigarettes. So that's very sad. The next door just disappeared. There were two sisters. And one sister was with her husband, and grown up children. Anyway, it was a deterioration of a family that never made the transition until the seventeen-year-old.

And the daughter, she lived in the basement flat one year with her child, who was two, same age as my Toby. And we had a little plastic wading pool in the back, and she would come over and play in the wading pool, not as a companion, necessarily. They were two, so it didn't matter. They were just splashing, and it was okay. She became a lawyer—anyway, so there's

some successful members of the family that moved out. The seventeen-year-old, he always had a job, but he never had a—he had a girlfriend, finally, and they both were smoking all the time. [groans] She died. So that was not a companionship, but it's still moderately friendly.

Dziedzic: And the same family for a few generations—two generations?

Wright: They bought in 1927. You know, when you go down and look at the things. They came down in 1927, obviously as a young couple, and raised their family.

Dziedzic: Are there other families that you remember on the block?

Wright: Yes, the Hanleys. Whooo! Mrs. Hanley lived right next door in the ground floor apartment here. I don't know the configuration because I've never been in an apartment in that building. I've just been to the doors of many of them, for one reason or another—some nice. But he was a longshoreman, worked the docks. They had seven in that tiny apartment. The youngest one was Laurie, who was my daughter's age, which of course—and she was tough. She had all those older brothers and sisters. Some nice, some not so nice. I mean, one of them helped me change a tire on the car one time. He said, "Oh yeah, sure. Come on, I'll help you with that." And that sort of thing. And Lillian. Because he'd be out there, "Lillian!"—loud. Anyway, I never tangled with him. The oldest son, Mike, has a moving business. Actually has an office down in Soho and is moderately successful.

And who else did she have? There was one who was gay and he was divine. He was just a good friendly sort. There was the one who changed the tire, that was Kevin. And Laurie and my daughter. Let's see. Lillian had asked, because we have an Ailanthus tree outside the porch—the porch was a little smaller, we extended it a foot or two—and she said, "Can Laurie come for her"—what's that Catholic thing that you have to do?—"confirmation?" Or something in the church.

Dziedzic: Communion? Or confirmation.

Wright: You wear a pretty white dress. And Laurie was pretty. Some of them were not so pretty [laughs]. They were a tough, Irish family. And she came and she took her confirmation picture on the porch with the Ailanthus tree there. So we were moderately good friends, I mean, that sort of thing.

There was another family there. Mrs. Olshinski [phonetic] was the super. And Mrs. Olshinski was this little tiny lady, all shriveled up and everything. She used to sling those garbage cans. She was amazing. But all I did was say hello and that sort of thing to her. I didn't really have any occasion to help her. But nobody else did. Although she had two grandsons. Long after she'd gone, her daughter, who was quite beautiful, married a nice guy that had a car. Larry. Larry had a car and he parked it and parked it, and I parked and parked my car (we called it the "car club" and it was mostly women who moved the cars for alternate side parking). So Larry had two sons who were sort of the age of my youngest son. One was little and shifty looking, and he's long gone. He probably went to jail. And then the other one is big and tall, looked more like his mother with the blonde hair.

And Larry, named for his father, he and I became quite nice friends, actually [laughs]. But he's married and moved away now. He lives in the suburbs. I used to see him. I think he became a city garbage man first, and then he married and moved away. So I don't know where Larry's gone. But there's Bobby who still lives there. Bobby Goodson, who grew up in the apartment on the second floor. He married a woman named Jane, and they had a little boy named Rob. And I always wanted Rob to come to the nursery school. But they were both city employees, with the police department, I think, in one way or another. I don't think they were police. She might have been an officer, but I don't think Rob was. He was employed by the city in some capacity or other. And he and I talk and, you know, that sort of thing. But we have never socialized together.

And Robbie, the little boy, now has two or three children that the father is encouraging to go to college. He said, "Yes, I helped them with that." And Bob, himself, is deaf as a post now. So I had to go over and talk to him closely [laughs]. But he's a very nice sort. Jane, they separated many years ago. But I remember Tuesday is the day that the Hanleys would come, and Bob Gibson, and sometimes Chris next door. And they would have lunch at the White Horse, when it was the White Horse. When it was the real old White Horse. You could see them inside all having their lunch and the beers. And we would often be in the back—Anne Tonachel and the

guy that she was with long after her husband left, who still lives on Bleecker Street, but I think he's having a hard time walking so I don't see him so much anymore. [02:10:01] Anyway, we loved the White Horse, too! I mean, they had good chili and good burgers. And what else do you need for lunch in the Village? So I miss it. I don't think I'd be happy there now. I'm not sure. But they didn't sell the bar, the bar is still there. That's what all these guys—and they don't go to Tuesdays, they go up to the fish place on Jane Street. They like that now. So I have some acquaintance with these people.

Dziedzic: It sounds like there's a lot of—it hasn't been a total change.

Wright: Oh! And I used to have Halloween. I'd put out the trick or treats, and some of the guys would come. That was early on, when my kids were still little too, of course. And there were sisters across the street, Margie and Jane. And they had very imaginative costumes. Always fun. And so I knew that they had a nice mother, and their father worked the docks. And of course, I think the mother has recently died because I don't see Margie. [Softly] Margie? What was the other one's name? It's gone. I'm sorry.

Anyway, I went into the polling place a year or so ago, to vote, whenever it was. And I said, "I haven't seen you for ages!" I'd occasionally see them on the bus, or something. And there's another guy that talks to Bob all the time, but he lived on a different street, [and when I saw him] I said, "Oh, there you are!" So we sat next to each other on the bus and that was kind of fun.

Dziedzic: Oh wow.

Wright: I know nothing about his history or who his family is or anything. He's just one of Bob's friends that comes and sees Bob, so he's nice. I said, "Bob's okay? I haven't seen him." And he said. "He's all right." So it's that kind of thing that we do. And if I ever saw Chris, I would speak to him. And the only time I ever went in their house was when I had a cat that leapt—see, their extension goes out. This house used to have an extension too, but not in my day. And my cat leapt from my bedroom window to their extension. They had a dog that they treated badly. It wasn't a dear family friend, it was just "a dog" [grumbles]. So I got over, and they were

scared of my cat [laughs]. So I got him back. That was the only time. They had taken out the stairway and had a metal apartment house stairway. So there's goes the mahogany railing and that sort of stuff, and it was all stainless steel and whatever because it was safer. I think it was because it was safer.

Dziedzic: Well, what changes have you noticed in the neighborhood, if not on the block, I guess.

Wright: Well, everything's much more spiffed up. Oh, and the private houses down here. There's one that has a behind-house. I can't see the behind-house—that's 330. 322-4 is the old tenement building with the Hanleys and Gibsons and all those guys lived in. And then the next one is a modern house that used to be a garage. Lots of garages on the street. Well, two garages on the street. And they turned it into an apartment house. But next to that, you'll see it, I think it's 330, or 330-something. You can see it has the doorway to the right of the stoop door, and it's a down stoop. I think they've taken off the top part. But back there was a little behind-house. And a friend of ours, years ago, when we still lived on Bank Street, went back in there and it was very cute. It was a little bachelor pad for this guy. But tiny, tiny, tiny. And then the garage, which has also been sold. What's going to happen to that one, we don't know. And then the house with the behind. It goes on like that. And then two old houses. No, I don't know anybody. Oh yes! Well there was Mrs.—see my problem is names now. Terrible.

Dziedzic: That's fine. I'm sorry to grill you. [02:15:00] It's interesting to hear.

Wright: Well, I can find out about that house too. It's the one with the behind-walk that's on this side, you come to it. And my friend, Alice, and Jeffrey live there. They're members of the organization, I think. She has a beautiful fern plant that just died away when the frost comes. And you walk back to theirs, and it's two rooms. One of top of the other—that's it—in their little behind-house. Alice is Irish—Derry—and brought up in the theater. Her mother was a theater cleaner, I think. She did something. She wasn't an actor. She did something in the theater that was not fancy. And then Jeffrey—I don't know anything about Jeffrey. But he's Alice's husband and they live in this funny little place back in there. And she's very talky.

And when I was trying to get the building next door, which your leader [Andrew Berman, Executive Director of Village Preservation] was always very nice about. And I will send them money. I'm sorry, I just haven't done it yet. [laughs] I go off on tangents, that's what I do.

Dziedzic: Well, I actually did want to re-mention the Village Preservation. You also served on an education committee.

Wright: For a while. It just kind of "myst-appeared," as my daughter used to say. It myst-appeared. I didn't hear anything about it. By that time, I think, I was played out. I wasn't taking leading roles anymore, but I was very flattered to be on the committee. And we went around—a charming girl and I liked her a lot, and I think that Judith [Stonehill] knows who that was. I can't remember.

Dziedzic: Was it Jane Cowan?

Wright: No. It was early on, very early on. I went with her a couple of times, I went alone a couple of times, and I enjoyed talking to her a lot. She was a mother. Was she an employee? Or had she come through the architectural connections? I can't remember. I could look it up somewhere, I think. And I enjoyed that, and I thought that they could have done more. And I thought it was charming the way they'd set it up. She was the one that gave the lecture, and I helped her control the crowds. That was it. She gave the talk. She was the one that was really interacting with the children. And had she been a teacher? Maybe she had, I don't know. And she had children, so it wasn't a full time job that she was doing, I don't think. But she was a paid employee, and her spiel was very, very good. And I learned a lot. It was a lot of fun, that one. But then I just sort of didn't hear any more. I don't think it was because I didn't respond. I think it just tapered off. Is it still going on?

Dziedzic: I only found it in annual report, and then I didn't see it again.

Wright: I think it tapered off. It was a terrific idea that would have taken much more support. I couldn't jump to it at that time. Whatever I was doing was—nothing. [laughs] But it came too

late for me. If it had come right after the nursery school retirement, maybe I would. But then Hunter came for me. That came within a year, and that was so good. And then after Hunter, I think I was played out, I think. I don't know. Because it was time for me to finish Hunter. A lot of subway going, and a lot of visiting and talking, which is—I'm very good at the talking part.

Dziedzic: [Laughs] Well, maybe this is kind of like a concluding question.

Wright: I've led you on many ways that I haven't finished up, and I'm sorry.

Dziedzic: No, I've really learned so much. It's so nice to hear details, actually. I wanted to ask, have you noticed changes in children over the years?

Wright: Well, I have my grands. Different grands of different ages. And no. Children develop at their own pace, but they do it in a regulated way. I mean, there are certain things that come at certain ages, like the reading, and you can't—to do too hard at any time is not good. You have to flow with—and I'm totally convinced of that. [02:20:00] And you hope you catch all the little sparks and danger things. Yes, you hope you catch the danger things and can react properly to them. But you also hope you can catch the creative ones too because it's just flowing all the time. It's wonderful.

I still love watching kids. That's always fun. On the streets and in the restaurants. Haven't done much of that this past couple of years. Just beginning now. No, but I think children have their own programs in there, and you hope you catch it. That's what the purpose of school is, to be able to catch it at the right times, and I think most schools know the good times. Don't force.

Dziedzic: Is there anything else that you would like to add that I haven't asked you about?

Wright: [laughs] I have no idea in my head at the moment.

Dziedzic: Okay. Well that was a wonderful statement to end on, too. So we can end there.

Wright: Children are fabulous, and always interesting. And they go with their own, and you try to catch it. That's it.

Dziedzic: Thank you so much.

END OF RECORDING

Oral History Interview with Shirley Wright, November 18, 2022

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Birthyear	1927
Birthplace	Mansfield, Ohio
Narrator Age	95
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
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