

*Interviewer: Maury Miller; transcribed by Katelyn Rhoads; and edited by Gary Strohm*

Ann Bennet was born in Harrisburg, Illinois in 1939, the daughter of Harry and Mildred Hurst. She has one sister, Mary and three brothers, Don, Steven and Michael.

Ann explained that she didn't live in Harrisburg very long, "I was still an infant when we moved to Centralia, which is where I grew up. I had a lot of chores. My sister and I were responsible for a good part of the house cleaning. With three little brothers coming behind me, I helped my mother take care of my brothers."

As a young girl, Ann enjoyed riding her bicycle and reading. "Every opportunity I had, I read," said Bennet. "I started out reading because my aunt was a children's librarian at the library. She helped me select books when I wasn't even in school yet. I learned to read when I was four. I remember reading *Flicka*, *Ricka* and *Dicka*. By the time I was in elementary school, I was reading biographies."

Ann attended Schilling Elementary School, one of eight elementary schools in Centralia at the time. She then attended Centralia High School and attended the junior college which is now known as Kaskaskia Community College. She went on to the University of Illinois to complete her degree in Education with a major in English. Later, she earned a master's degree from Indiana State University.

"My dad always worked at least two jobs, sometimes three," said Mrs. Bennet. "My mother was always very busy taking care of children and the house. Housekeep-

ing at that time was not easy. She didn't have all of the equipment that we have today. It took a lot of effort to get the house clean and my mother was always particular."

"She always made good meals," continued Ann. "We always had dinner together. No matter who had what after school, we managed to have dinner together. We also always went to church together. In the summertime, we often would picnic. All five of us worked at the community swimming pool as life guards, and it wasn't uncommon for mother to pack a picnic lunch and bring it out."

"I enjoyed playing with the kids in the neighborhood," said Ann. "I lived on a boulevard which actually amounted to two blocks and there were 38 children. I never waited for someone to play with. We played a lot of baseball, roller skated, played jacks and Annie Over."

"I had two good friends who lived in the same block as I did," said Ann. "And we spent time together. I loved movies, and I was allowed to go with a group of friends when I was ten or eleven years old. We could walk there, because we didn't have a car. We walked everywhere we went."

As for pets, "We always had a cat," said Bennet. "My dad always had bird dogs, they were always considered pets. The cats were the real family pets."

Ann explained that she and her husband Harley met in February 1963 in Centralia. He was a close friend of a fellow she was dating at the time. "He introduced us and I ended up marrying Harley." Harley attended Bradley University at the time and by the time that they married, Harley was

working for an accounting firm in Peoria, and Ann was teaching school in Le Roy, a small town between Champlain and Bloomington.

Ann and Harley moved to Marshall later in the 1960s. "Harley grew up here," explained Ann. "His family had a farm here. They didn't want their children going to school in Peoria, where they were living at the time. "There was a great deal of unrest in that community at that time," said Ann. "Harley was offered a position in Terre Haute, and everything fell into place."

The couple built a home on the farm near Marshall where Harley had grown up.

"When we first moved there, the neighbors were very sparse," said Mrs. Bennet. "In the time that we have lived there, there have been several homes built. It is a dead end road. We are the next to last ones on the road. The last house is owned by someone in West Virginia."

The Bennets have three children, Laura, Rachel and Joseph. When their son Joseph started school, Mrs. Bennet began teaching here. She taught junior high English - primarily grammar - and some literature. She taught at the junior high for 12 years and then taught sophomores and seniors for 13 years at the high school.

Ann preferred teaching at the high school level, "I think I was designed to be a senior high teacher...I think high school students are such interesting people. They are right on the cusp of something wonderful, and some of them have such wonderful senses of humor. It is fun to work with that."

Ann noted that there are several people who have had a big influence on her life.

"My granddaughter was one. She lived down the

street from us. She was always a very sympathetic and compassionate person."

Another person was Robert Burkheimer. "When I first met him, he was the dean of the junior college. He became a good friend." He later became the state director of the Illinois Community Colleges. He was also a poet. "He wrote a couple of books of poetry that I have inscribed," shared Bennet.

One of the most memorable events in her life was a terrible coal mine explosion which occurred near Centralia when she was only five or six years old. 111 miners were killed.

"John Lewis, head of the miners union at that time, visited that mine several times and insisted that it be closed down because it was in terrible condition," said Ann.

"My parents were so concerned because their friend worked on that shift," said Ann. "The explosion happened as he was waiting for the elevator to go down. He was not involved and that stayed with me forever."

Other memorable events in her life were the threat of the Cuba invasion and the Vietnam War. Also, said Bennet, "when I was a child, I would hear things about communism and the communist world and those things stayed with me."

Ann said that there are many modern conveniences which have affected her life.

Among the most useful are the washer and dryer. "I think of my mother doing laundry and sometimes having to do it again because it rained or birds flew over."

She also mentioned gas and electric furnaces, "I remember my dad having to shovel coal into the furnace

at night and how dirty the coal dust was. It was difficult to keep the house clean.”

As for the city of Marshall, Ann commented, “Marshall is physically beautiful.” She noted that the residents have great pride in their homes and yards. “I remember my dad and the first time he came to Marshall. He came into town and drove around and when he came back he said, “This is a beautiful community.”

“People are concerned about each other,” said Bennet. “People really care about what happens to you, and they want to help as much as they can when there is a need.” She pointed to the way the people of Marshall come together to work on a project that needs to be done such as Harlan Hall and the home for the Scott family. “If you can help take care of a need, you do it.”

“I think there is a sense of companionship. I would encourage everyone to live in a community like Marshall if not Marshall,” said Ann. “It is a wonderful place to live and is an incredible place to raise children.”