

HELEN HENNESSEY

Interview by Bill Miles  
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TOPICS:

Immigration  
Education  
Teaching  
Kendall School  
Great Depression

Transcription by John W. Weigel  
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Q: Today is January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1990. The time is 7:30. This evening the Madison Heights Historical Commission is going to interview longtime Madison Heights resident and educator, Helen Hennessey. Mrs. Hennessey has been responsible for the educational development of decades of Madison School District students. Mrs. Hennessey, our first question. Please state your name and present address for this taped interview.

A: My name is Helen Anita Hennessey and I live at 1712 Ann Terrace, Madison Heights.

Q: According to our research you were married and have four children. Please tell us the names of your husband and your children.

A: My husband's name was Mark. And my children's name...I have one daughter. Her name is Peggy. And then I have three sons, Bill, John and Mark.

Q: Mrs. Hennessey, you were selected as a interviewee because of your years as a teacher for the Madison School District and your years of residence. How long have you lived in Madison Heights?

A: Well, as a child, I was twelve years old when I moved into Madison Heights in 1924. My mother had passed away about two years before then and we lived with our grandparents. And my grandmother became ill, and my father owned a piece of...he owned an acre of land back of that Madis...old Madison High School. So in the meantime he had built a home and when I was twelve years old I came into Madison Heights and kept house for my two sisters and two brothers and my dad.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in Detroit.

Q: And...

A: Detroit, Michigan.

Q: What year did you move to head of...Madison Heights and why did your father decide...how did he pick Madison Heights to buy a piece of land?

A: Well I think he worked with some friends, and they had owned land in Madison Heights. And he always liked to be out on the outskirts, so he bought an acre of a land and he decided to build a home and there was just no question about it. We just moved to Madison Heights. It was like moving off the world. But...

Q: I believe you said you lived on Ferry in...in Detroit.

A: On Ferry and Brush.

Q: Yeah.

- A: The original Ferry Seat Company owners lived across the street from us. And that was when I lived with my grandparents.
- Q: Okay. What year did you move...well, let's see. When you moved to Madison Heights just...Madison School District in 1924, was it called "Madison" or was it still the Greenwood School District?
- A: No, it was...as far as I know it was always called the Madison School District.
- Q: Okay.
- A: But Greenwood School was just part of the Madison School District.
- Q: Okay.
- A: And it was located on John R...let's see... south of Eleven Mile Road.
- Q: Okay. What was the name of the building where you first attended school and where was it located?
- A: The first building that I attended school as a child?
- Q: Right.
- A: It was the Greenwood School on John R.
- Q: Okay.
- A: And Mr. Smith was our principal.
- Q: That was...the Greenwood School was originally where? In front of Wilkinson. Right around Wilkinson.
- A: It was right on the Wilkinson. It was located on the Wilkinson land.
- Q: Okay.
- A: And then the Madison School District...the little Greenwood School was moved to Lincoln and Wolverine, and the M...old Madison School was built on the same location on John R.
- Q: Okay.
- A: And Greig.
- Q: Now according to our records the Greenwood School was a one-room schoolhouse.

A: Yeah.

Q: How did you get there each day and what was it like as a student attending a one-room school?

A: Well, being a scholar as...as usual...and we lived right behind the school about a block away, so it was just the running a pass right from the back door to the school. Never missed a day and we were never ill. We...we just...I mean, our school was our whole life. It...it was...we...we had very...it was a good feeling just to be in school, I guess, because we'd be there alone. And Dad would go to work, and we would...we were there alone. I...we just had a wonderful, wonderful Dad.

Q: How many...how many children were in the school when you attended?

A: I think...

Q: Just an estimate.

A: I think about thirty-five.

Q: About thirty-five. They were all mixed grades?

A: They were all mixed grades. And I don't....I know that I was into the fifth grade, but they put these to the sixth grade...

Q: Okay.

A: ...because of...I think it...because they either needed another seat or...or because we...I was just m...more advanced than the other folks. We, you know, like I knew how to diagram sentences, which those people, the people that were in school in my grade, or maybe if she needed to have...maybe she didn't have a fifth grade. I can't remember that.

Q: Who was your teacher? Do you remember your teacher there?

A: Mrs. Shaw was one of our teachers.

Q: Mrs. Shaw.

A: Yeah.

Q: Now there was one teacher for the whole school.

A: There was Mr. Smith and Mrs. Shaw.

Q: Mr. Smith was the principal.

A: Mmhmm..

Q: Did he teach any classes?

A: I...he must have t...he sh...he must have taught the...like the boys'...the...the boys' classes.

Q: Okay.

A: [Inaudible].

Q: You said something about the school being divided too.

A: Well, the only s...the only part that was divided...the seats were in order, like the second grade and the third grade and the fourth grade, and then we'd go to the corner room to eat as groups.

Q: Mm-kay. Okay. Now you mentioned this already, put let's put this in again. What happened to the Greenwood School in the late summer of 1926?

A: By that time the Greenwood School was moved to Wolverine and Lincoln.

Q: Okay.

A: And then the...the new school, the Madison High School, the one that was built in the 1925 or '6 or '7...it was...I had graduated from the old Greenwood School. That was moved away and I started ninth grade at the same location but in another building.

Q: Okay.

A: So I was there when the building was being built. And I was there when the school was being torn down fifty years.

Q: So...

?: [Unidentified woman] [Inaudible] head out the back door to the school.

A: Yeah.

?: [Unidentified woman] That was nice.

A: Oh, it's wonderful.

Q: So actually you never changed buildings. You stayed in the same place. The buildings moved around but you never did.

A: No, I'm talking as a student.

Q: As a student.

A: Because I graduated in h...from high school, from Madison School in 1930.

Q: Okay.

A: And in the 1930, that very June, I went to Eastern.

Q: Okay. I have a question.

A: Okay.

Q: Most women growing up in the early 1900s were not encouraged to seek an education. What can you tell us about your early family life that made your experience different?

A: Okay.

Q: Who encouraged you?

A: Well, my encouragement came from my father...

Q: Okay.

A: ...for one thing. However, I...I always had teaching on my mind. I...I never really thought of teaching but I always had responsibilities of using this and...so when we were at Grandma's, our outlet was going to the library. So nobody could talk to me and tell me to go do this or go to the store or up here or wh...do...whatever, so that I would take my two sisters and two brothers and we'd end up at the library. We'd go to the library and I...I think I [inaudible] this big city library down on Woodward Avenue. And then we'd cross the street and we'd go to the art institute and I knew we were...all the rooms were, the American Room and the Egyptian Room, and you name it. We...we knew all the corners and crevices of the building. But Dad was the one that...he came from the family where people were educated and when he came into our country, he came from Poland. And his brother was mayor of the town. Poland is a buffer state between Russian and Germany. So they was near the Russian border, and the...and the Russians were coming in and taking the Polish boys into the service. He was fourteen years old, and because of his older brother being the mayor, he thought he...he would send my brother...'cause, like, my father was an orphan at seven. But he lived with his brother. So he sent the boy to America, to his uncle, who...and Dad came, like, around Annapolis. That area. And it was a mining area, so that he was too young to work in the mines, according to the uncle. So they sent him to De...to Detroit, where he...he worked with another uncle, who had a big bar. And my Dad never drank or smoked. The Poles can verify that. But it was the idea that he had...I suppose as a youngster he had seen so much of

it at the bar. So when he was eighteen he worked for Davis, the...oh...drugstore people...what...I...I can't remember...

?: [Unidentified woman] Parke-Davis [inaudible].

Q: Parke-Davis.

A: Parke-Davis. And then when Ford opened up for five dollars an hour, he went to Ford. And of course he was married and...and they...he had...they had five children, and I was the eldest. And my mother died when she was thirty-three, of course after the birth of her child. And...so we went to live with my grandparents. Well my grandmother became ill, and, you know, can you imagine having five children move in on you? She was absolutely a darling and we adored her. And I don't know...God was with us because He...we all went to school. I have a sister who's an accountant. I have a brother who's an engineer. And I...I have a sister who was going to be a nurse, and we lost our money in the...when the...when the banks went down. But...I don't know. Whatever we did, I became a teacher and my whole life was absolutely nothing but going to school and I went to...

Q: I have one question before you answer that. How did you finance your first two years of college? I think this is interesting.

A: Oh. Well, my father was working at Ford's. And you know he has the five children to support. Can you imagine a man with five children, living alone, and we each had a job. And we...if we brought a B home from school, it was "Next time you bring in an A or else we'll have to visit the teacher." Well, you know, that...I...I couldn't have my father go and talk to the teacher. That would be very embarrassing. But anyway, the question how we...we didn't have any money. Dad was working. And it was during the Depression. And we went to Grandma's, and they had the money. But then, you know, like in those days, fifty years ago, a girl going to college? Forget it. She's gonna get married and have children and be home. So my Dad and I—he didn't have a car in those days—we took the bus, the John R bus...we paid a nickel on the bus, and we went to Highland Park to the Household Finance. And he borrowed my first money to go to school, at the Household Finance. And as...he...he put up our home.

Q: As collateral for your education.

A: As collateral for my schooling. Can you imagine? But, oh I...I went to school and...

Q: Now your first two years you went to Eastern.

A: Mmhmm.

Q: Now after that you were granted a lifetime certificate...

A: Mmhmm.

Q: ...that qualified you as a teacher. Did you start to teach after you got the certificate?

A: Oh definitely. Right...very...the very September after the two years were over, I...I went to...I had...let's see, I was only like eighteen, nineteen when I started teaching. And the reason I got this job so quickly was because Mrs. Moegle was the superintendent of schools here in Madison Heights. And of course how convenient was...it was for me to live where I lived. I walked to Edison School, and nine years I taught school...between seven and nine years and never missed a day walking back and forth to school every morning. And never...and you were...you know, you signed a contract, and you were never late and you never...whatever. But...

?: [Unidentified woman] Did they have a lot of rules for women teachers back in those days?

A: The rules were...number one rule was you wore a smock. And a number two rule was when you were married you never received your contract.

?: [Unidentified woman] After you were married?

A: After you were married.

Q: So when you started you taught only one year, because you got married, right?

A: No. No. See...I...I was graduated in 1930. And then between 1930, 1938 I taught school. I mean...

Q: Okay.

A: ...I went to school in the...six or seven years. But when I was married I had been going with my husband, whom I met in Madison Heights. And you didn't have your contract signed if you were married. Well, you know, like, I was having a good time, and I didn't want to...I didn't want to know if I was going to get married or not. But the way I was raised, I was raised in being responsible for my sisters and brothers. And my Dad happened to be injured at work, and so the year that I was going to be married, like '36, '37, I said, "We...we can't" because I was responsible for my children...for my sisters and brothers. And I didn't know if Dad was going to live, 'cause that's...he was badly hurt at work. But...anyway, what is another question?

Q: Okay, what was the first school you taught at when you came to Madison School District?

A: The first school I taught at was the...the Edison School.



Q: Okay.

A: And I taught there for like six or seven years. And then I was married. And the thing of it was, I had signed my contract in April and my husband said, "We either get married or else." Because we had been going for a few years before that, you see. And so...so I thought, "Okay, this is it." So we were married in July, and I couldn't tell anyone that I was getting married, because I want...I had already signed my contract in April. So that...I felt, "Well...I'll...I'll just...I'll just teach the one year, and then I'll let...you know, let go." Besides my husband didn't want me teaching because he thought he was the breadwinner. And...and so I had taught that one year and then the next year I was home. And I could see the children going to school. And you know, like, I...I would be ironing shirts [inaudible] doing it and all that stuff. But other than that...

Q: Did you ever teach at the Kendall School?

A: Why of course.

Q: Okay. Now that was when? That was after you were off. For being married.

A: That was...that was in...after I was married.

Q: Okay.

A: '39...

Q: Okay.

A: ... about '39, '40.

Q: [Unidentified woman] I have a question.

A: Yes.

Q: Mrs. Hennessey, when you went back to work and you were a married teacher, how did that affect your contract?

A: Well what I did, because I didn't think I'd ever...ever teach again after I was married, but when I went back to teaching, no...we had money in the teacher's...whatever...like an insurance. So I had taken my money out. And that meant if I wanted to go back to teaching, I'd have to reinstate my money. 'Cause...I don't know...you know, two or three hundred dollars was in those days. And...so I...I reinstated my money and so I didn't lose any of...I think I lost maybe five years.

Q: It's like a pension.

- A: Yeah, like my pension. I put my pension money back but I lost some years of teaching. They didn't give me...they only gave me five years of whatever...whatever teaching I had. I think I had maybe seven or eight or nine years but I only received five.
- ?: [Unidentified woman] They didn't keep you teaching without a...a...
- Q: Contract?
- A: Oh honey, I was...
- ?: [Unidentified woman] Did you have a provisional contract or...?
- A: No, no. I went back...I went back to...to U...to the University of Detroit. And I went back to Michigan. And then I received a degree...my degree from Wayne. And I had two degrees from Wayne. I had my special...my...I had a special education degree and I had a degree in science and English. So I have...I have a lot of credit...uni...you know, university credit because...
- ?: [Unidentified woman] There were so many teachers during that time who lost a part of their retirement because the school districts kept them floating...
- ?: Mmhmm.
- ?: ...so they didn't have to give 'em a permanent contract.
- A: Well I was really very fortunate. My first...you can see my first year of teaching very sincere, teaching at the Edison School. And the superintendent of schools, which is Mrs. Moegle, called one at a time to her office and she'd say, "Now you go and you tell Mrs. Anderson to vote," or Mr. So-and-So, Mr. Guenther or whoever, on the Board. And, you know, like naïve? "Oh Mrs. Moegle I wouldn't think of telling somebody how to vote." My father, I didn't even know if he was a Democrat or a Republican. We didn't dare and ask. Any...that was his private deal, you know. And she's telling me to go and tell these people to vote. And...or...or whatever. So I told her. So what happened, I did not get my contract signed the next year. But I didn't tell my Dad because he would have a broken heart for sure. And so what did I do but I walked to Thirteen Mile. There was a building there on Thirteen Mile and John R, which was like the Ford office for the Lamphere School years ago. But you know I never got there. I...I got cold feet and I came back home. And in the meantime, that very day or the day after, we were called to court. Can you imagine me going to Pontiac, to court? To tell the...the...you know, we were being...they had us out of the building. In...in the meantime I had my contract signed but Moegle wouldn't let us go back into the building. She had an injunction against the teachers that didn't do her bidding. So we were all...October, November...isn't that...?
- ?: [Unidentified man] Yeah, [inaudible].

?: [Unidentified man] That sounds like Russia.

CS: [Connie Schmelzle] Yes. Yes.

A: And so this is a cold winter, icy. Oh we're driving to Pontiac and...and we're in this court. And I never got to say anything because I thought we looked like a mouse sitting some place in the corner, but we had Ms. Tomlinson and several o...of the other teachers who were very outspoken. And anyway she lost. She was taken out.

CS: Who?

A: Mrs. Moegle. Mrs. Moegle lost. And we were all reinstated. Talk about happiness for myself. I didn't want to be...oh, I didn't want to be a loser for my...for my father's sake. I mean, you know, he was always...I remember when the teachers...when the teachers...when I had my retirement party, the teachers gave me a party at Kingsley and...and I had so many people there. It was just so beauti...beautiful. And my Dad...my sister flew him in from Texas. He...he came in and I had my sisters and my sons and my little family.

Q: Wait, before you retire, we have some other...

[General Laughter]

Q: ...[inaudible]. We don't want to getcha...we still got fifty years to go through here.

LM: The year that you were talkin' about Mrs. Moegle left, was 1935. [Inaudible].

?: [Unidentified woman] [Inaudible].

Q: Okay, Mrs. Moegle left in '35. [Transcriber's Note: The Madison Heights Heritage Book states that Moegle "served until 1932".] In fact...

?: They chiseled her name off the school by the way. [Inaudible].

Q: Lois remembers her being carried out of the school building. Lois was a student.

?: Is that right?

LM: They picked up the chair and her chair and all...

CS: Oh my god.

?: [Unidentified woman] Oh she was...she...

CS: They did what?

LM: They picked up the chair, two men on this side, and then carried her right out, sittin' her in the front.

?: [Inaudible].

LM: Where the horseshoe was.

?: Ohh.

Q: Okay, Helen...

?: [Inaudible].

A: Yes, they did change the Moegle name off the building and they put the Edison School instead.

Q: Helen, wha...you kind of mentioned this. What were your specialties while you were teaching?

A: My specialties? T...reading...

Q: Okay.

A: ...was one of my specialties.

Q: Okay.

A: Because I finally became a reading teacher as well. And...well, I was chairman of the science department.

Q: Yeah, you had some other positions too while you were...

A: ...and that was in junior high.

Q: Okay.

A: And oh I had charge of the baseball team at the Edison School, and then charge of the Safety...what is it...the Safety Squad?

Q: So you wore...you wore a lot of hats.

A: Umm...I...I did...I did do a lot as well. It was...you were asked to do, you just did it.

Q: Didn't you even have one of the first adult education classes?

A: Yes.

Q: What was it?

A: I had a gym...a women's gym class at the high school. Two hours. For the first hour we took exercises, and the second hour they killed me playing basketball. I think Lois was the one that [inaudible].

Q: Today's student discipline can be a problem. What techniques did you use when you were disciplining students?

A: Well, the thing...when I think back...think back, say thirty years. The pa...the parents...I'm not saying that they were more interested. They had more time to take with their children because the mothers were at home. And...and they would help them at home, with homework or...today we have new techniques. In math, for instance. And the parents are not educated in the new techniques of math. If I said to you, "Give me another name for four"...if you don't know what "four" is...another name for four. I mean it's so simple. But yet it's a new way of thinking. Teaching is thinking. Teaching how to think. Another name for four is two and two. But then you have the smart youngster and he'll say, "Oh I know another one, a hundred less ninety-six." Or a...or a Roman four. Or F-O-U-R. Or...you could name all kinds of combinations and that is another name for four. So is it...do you say "Two and two is four" or "Two and two are four"? It depends on how you look at it. Four is a unit. So if it's a unit, you say "is" four. And some of the techniques that I would use, I would always get the reading problems. Because...it wasn't...it wasn't that you knew so much about reading. You knew how to handle children. I have Diane Cagle [inaudible] on the school board and I had her in the first grade. And those kids, when they had the class reunion after thirty-some years, they invited the old teacher (could you imagine, after all these years?) to their class reunion. But when I...when I'm thinking back of the techniques that I had in reading, how do you know where a child should know or be when he is reading...when he learns to read? Or here...here I had in junior high...I'm...I'm going too far...in junior high too they could not read...think. In the public school system we have four kinds of diplomas. We have a college-bound kid. We have a business person. We have a vocational person. And then I call this the fan-dancing person [interrupted by general laughter], if you know what I mean. They don't do anything. They just dance for hours...go for hours. So...but they all get a...a piece of paper, and they all cross the stage. And everybody says, "Oh, all these people are graduating." They do not know that these kids...you can't graduate a hundred percent of people and...and they will know everything a hundred percent. Because they are on different levels. So here we have the "C" level youngsters. They...they read and they work and they go to college. Depends if they have all the quali...qualifications here. But understand in the public school we have to educate a hundred percent of the students. In a private school your parents pay for your education and if you don't do well, the...the professor or whoever says, "Hey, we can't deal with this kid. This kid has to..." You know, they don't put up with any of this stuff. Here we put up...you...you give a child on the...an assignment and he will say to you, "Are you crazy? You think I'm gonna do this ten times?" You know, like...so that in twenty years ago or thirty years ago, you

had a more of a rapport with the parents. If...if the child wasn't doing well, the parents would come to school and you know what? You knew all the parents. One of my techniques was even like in junior high, I would have the parents come in of an evening and they would sit in the child's seat with their books. Do you remember that, Mrs. Mills? And I would explain to the parents what was required of that child for that semester. Maybe not all the people would do it, but most of my people were always welcome and I always had a roomful. And I worked with the parents, which was something that a lot of the teachers don't do today. They just have too much of everything else going. When...when astronauts were beginning to do their deal, I...I was teaching first-grade science at the time. And this little David Dawson came up to me. He says, "Mrs. Hennessey, you forgot one planet." And I thought "Pluto, Jupiter..." and I started naming the planets. I said, "No David, we have all the planets." He says, "No, you do not. You have...you forgot Planet X." But it was just the idea that he was so aware of the planets and...and we had such a good time when the...when the Bea...what is it...what are the...the English group of...?

Q: Beatles.

A: The Beatles.

Q: Beatles.

A: When the Beatles landed, oh man, I had pictures of the Beatles all over, because it was such an interest and...and so I made a reading lesson out of it, with the names of...what names begin with so-and-so-and-so, how many names begin with "K" or how many names with "D" and so it was...everything that I did...all the techniques that I did with involved...revolved or involved class work.

Q: Keeping the students interested.

A: Yeah, it was...

Q: And the parents interested in the students.

A: Mmhmm.

Q: Okay.

A: And...and many times I would get foreign students comin' from different countries. During the war, the prisoners of war, families were brought in and they would bring the...I had two little girls in there. They were so s...frightened, and they could not speak, so I said, "Is there anyone in my room that knows another language?" And this little youngster...and I thought "Oh isn't that nice? What do you speak?" And he says, "I speak Kentuckian."

[General laughter]

?: [Unidentified woman] [Inaudible] that's not funny [inaudible].

A: They were funny. They were funny because he thought that...that...it was a language.

Q: Okay, I want to...I have a couple other questions for you.

A: Oh no.

Q: Who was your superior? I want to get back to Kendall School a little bit. Who was your superior while you were at the Kendall School? Teaching at Kendall School?

A: The only superior that I remember um...was Mr. Smith.

Q: Mr. Smith.

A: And...I mean, you know, when you're twelve years old...

Q: No, I'm talking about when you were teaching at the Kendall School.

A: Oh. Oh, Mr. Wilkinson.

Q: Mr...Mr. Wilkinson. Okay. What can you tell us about Mr. Wilkinson? Anything?

A: Mr. Wilkinson was one prince of a grand man. Just a prince of a man. He...he...if you asked him a question, he would answer a question, but it was either yes or no, but it was in the middle, and y...you never really...he never...he never caught himself and then he...it was...

LM: [Inaudible].

A: Pardon?

LM: [Inaudible] what you're tryin' to say.

A: Oh, it...it was really, you know, like...but he was such a wonderful man. If you had something...if it was a family business or if it was a child business, or any...if you had any problems...you...I felt like I could just go and tell him. And...and I...I was very fortunate to work with...my rapport with my teachers, with the teachers that were in the building where I worked...we...we just had wonderful teachers.

Q: Now when you were at Kendall, it was on the Wilkins...the Kendall property, right?

A: Mmhmm. Kendall wa...Mr. Kendall was a farmer, and he had this huge piece of land. I don't know how many acres. Must have been ten, twenty...twenty, thirty acres. And on the corner of one of the acres, they sold the land to the school, and...and that's where they put the Kendall School.

Q: That was on the corner of Wolverine and Lincoln, right?

A: Yes. Okay.

Q: Okay. And then you talked...how...you...

D: [Inaudible].

Q: Go ahead Darrel.

D: It run from Eleven Mile Road to...[I believe?], to Lincoln.

A: Yes.

D: East and west I don't know how far it went. West or...

A: It went...it stopped there in front of the Chacas house.

D: Chacas.

A: Yeah. Nine Mile...I mean, Lincoln

DD: Mmhmm.

A: And then it's a dead end...on...on Lincoln.

DD: [Inaudible] Eleven Mile Road and that's Kendall [inaudible].

Q: Do you remember what year you taught there?

A: Well, it was...it would have been in maybe '37.

Q: And how many years were you there?

A: One or two, I can't remember.

Q: All right.

A: [Inaudible].

Q: That's close enough. Do you remember what became of the Kendall School?

A: Yes. It...



Q: What finally happened to it?

A: It was moved and it's now located on...on the Eleven Mile Road east of John R. A block east of John R. That's the Kendall School.

Q: Mm-kay. That's in front of the United Me...Methodist Church.

A: Mmhmm. The little white building.

Q: Okay. That's the one they're using as the activity building.

A: I guess so, but...

Q: Yeah.

?: [Unidentified man] Storage.

Q: Okay. Okay, now...

A: What question are you on sir?

Q: We're...we're movin' all over the place. You're a fast woman to keep track of. Umm... can you tell us about any of your administrators besides Mr. Wilkinson?

A: Well, if you...if any of you remember Don Scott, he was a very outstanding man. And talk about knowing how he handled the students and the teachers, I think we ate out of his hand if he just cupped it out like that. We'd do any bidding. Although he... being a chairman...for instance, being a chairman of a...of a department, you had to take care of the books, you had to order the books, you had to have meetings with science...with the science teachers. And, you know, if you have six teachers and ten teachers to come to a meeting at one time, it would be like pulling a leg. But it was up to me and...so I had it for three or four years and...

Q: This was where, Wilkinson?

A: Yes, Wilkinson Junior High.

Q: Wilkinson.

A: My last two years where I was in junior high. I was g...I went to the office, and I said, "Mr. Scott, I do not want to be chairman anymore. Let someone else be the chairman." So I figured, "Well that's it. I don't want to do it anymore." But, you know, it's like "No, no. Yes." And finally, I was called to the offices; he said, "Hennessey, you have charge of ordering these books." Some new books at the commu...so I was automatically the same old thing over again. But...I did a lot of

things because...I s'pose I was there every day they...they could depend on...on me. It...it wasn't that...I...it was just part of my life.

Q: Mm-kay.

A: As I...as I have written here. It says "Forty-four years have gone by, where does one begin?" And then I said, "In 1930 I graduated from the Madison School system. The very summer began my university life. My father was a great believer." I told you all what...and he borrowed money from the Household company and of course it...it took me two years to pay it all back.

Q: Name some of your noteworthy students. There're some people that...

A: Oh, I have Larry Beecher, Dr. Larry Beecher, who has given me my glasses. I go over there, I...I feel like I'm takin' off for lunch and...and taken over to his home to meet his wife and the whole bit. And I have Robert [Gifflin?], who became a lawyer in California and he was admitted to the bar by Richard Nixon.

Q: Diane Cagle, who's on the Madison School Board.

A: Diane, oh I have all these kids' names over here someplace.

LM: Bernie Travnikar.

A: Ber...Bernie Travnikar.

Q: Now Bernie's what? Bernie's Special Services for Lamphere School District?

LM: No, no. The...

Q: Oh, the other.

LM: ...father.

Q: Oh, yeah. Okay, that Bernie.

A: No. And that Bernie...I had a Thunderbird, beautiful red maroon Thunderbird with white leather seats. And the kids came over one day and said, "Mrs. Hennessey, could we use your car in the parade, in the football field..." whatever...whatever they...

LM: Homecoming.

Q: Homecoming.

A: ...Homecoming, so I thought "Sure." You know, you press the button the top and out, you press the button the seats would go back and all that. It has everything on it. So they...they took my car in this parade. And I was sitting up in the

bleachers and they wasn't coming back and wasn't coming back and I was kind of worried. So I said to one of the fellows when he's driving up to the school to see if it was out in the school parking lot, because that's where they were to...so Bernie, the young Bernie standing on the corner and he said, "Oh, did you like the parade?" And I said, "It was wonderful." I said, "You have included all the clubs and all the members and it was just absolutely beautiful." And I said, "And what is your name?" He said, "Oh my name is Bernie Travnika." I said, "Oh, I was your father's teacher." He says, "Oh no, you're...he's too old."

[General Laughter]

A: I always tell that to Bernie; he's too old. And then I have Mrs. Sikorski...

CS: What happened...?

?: [Unidentified woman] What happened to your car?

A: Oh, I brought it home, of course.

?: [Unidentified woman] Oh.

A: Yeah, yeah. They finally got that after we waited, you know, maybe two hours. But I think folks took it out for a little drive. They had to go have a little fun, you know.

Q: Okay, what year did you retire?

A: In '76. But I never retired because...

Q: You're doin' somethin' right now.

A: Yes.

Q: Who's benefiting from your expertise now?

A: Well, I am teaching at the Senior Citizens'...of...Center. I have two days of high school teaching. I'm teaching the seniors to finish high school, and I have no behavioral problems.

[General laughter]

A: And when...and when they start talking, I'll say, "No more twittering please and they go [gestures and snickers], you know. We...we've had some very interesting classes. Last semester I taught Marco Polo's Journal, seven hundred years ago, and I found a book by Tim [Cimaron?]. He took the same trip. He wrote the...the...the journal, his journal and he compared...we compared his journal with Marco Polo's journal, going to...to the Silk Road in...from Europe...across Europe into Asia. And it was a very interesting class that we had. And of course

they hate English, but I'm a...also an English teacher. And anyways, it's a requirement by the state...your English and your government. So this semester we're...we had...we had g...the government, state government and the country's government. Plus our...we had a liter...literature discussion class, which...and we read the House of Seven Gables, by Mark.

Q: You also tutored.

A: [Inaudible].

Q: You also tutored kids at home.

A: Yes. And I...and I have three students that I tutor at home.

Q: Okay.

A: In...in the meantime...and in the meantime I go to the Center and play pinochle.

?: [Unidentified woman] Good for you.

Q: I have...you told me...you told me a story about one special student. And to me it sums up all of your philosophies and everything about teaching. His name was Kenneth Williams. Tell us a Kenneth Williams' story.

A: Kenneth Williams...if you...if you know of a young boy who's tall and big and handsome and...people are laughing at you because you get up in class and you can't read...so Mr. Scott said to me one day, "Could you give this little fellow a hand?" And so he and I, we...there used to be a little, old library room and it was not used as a library anymore because they had another room that was used as a library. And this was across from the office. Every...everyone was...he was one of these youngsters that was...fight at the drop of a pin, because he was so frustrated. Can you imagine now? My...my teaching philosophy is if you can think of a cone...and on the top of the cone it's independence. And if I gave you a book on the...on atomic energy, you could read it beautifully but you would not understand it. Unless...unless you were versed in it. So if you are not reading with understanding, you are not reading. You are just mimicking words. Okay? So then you go to the next level, and in the next level you have...you have instructional. That's the instructional level, where the mother or the teacher or someone tells you the new words that you're reading. And so too some of the skills. For instance, you are reading the word "citadel", a city, and you call it "kitadel" because you don't know when you use a "c" next to an "i" it becomes...it has the "s" sound. If you have a "c" next to an "e", it has "s" sound. If you have a "c" next to an "o" it has the "k" sound. So if you don't know these skills...so I'm teaching this child instruction.

Q: Kenneth Williams.

A: Mmhmm. He goes into his corner and he still can't read the words because, you know, he doesn't have the background in phonics. And I'm a very...believer in phonics...phonetics. So he comes back. Now I have instructed this child and he's gone to independent reading, and he still is...he becomes so frustrated that he doesn't want to read at all. And so he becomes a nuisance in class and all through school he does...he's moved around here and there and all over and he comes in, he has no background in any kind of techniques in...in reading, any phonics or any background. So now he is at a frustration level. So what I do with that child, I take him to the listening level. And in the listening level I'll read a story to him on the first grade, on the second grade, on the third grade, on the fourth grade. And I'll say...I'll ask him questions that...for him to answer to what I had read to him, so that he's listening. Is it...I'll say, "Is the cart red?" or "what color is the cart?" or "how many children in the family?" or...or some...something about each story. So here I have this child reading...listening on a tenth grade level, and he's only on a third grade reading level. So he's...he should be here but he's here. So this is where you bring him up in...in...in the different technique.

Q: Now what did he do? He...

A: Oh, he...I worked with him...um...he was a bright...and he really wanted to read and I had him so fired up that he was going to read like nobody's business. He went...I...I think I had him about seven months of the school year. And finally he went...he went into his social studies class, and he read a paragraph for the teacher and the whole class. They were just floored. And he ran into the office and said to Mr. Scott, "Mr. Scott I read my story the first time." And, you know, he was so thrilled. But talking about back to reading, I...I went to reading first grade teacher for a long, long time. In fact, when I went back to first grade, I was only going to help out for two weeks, until they...they built up their staff, because they had a new building. So Mrs. Hennessey was there for two weeks and I stayed for fifteen years.

CS: [Laughter].

A: And they used to say to me, "Well, are they ever going to graduate you from the thir...the first grade?"

CS: [Laughter].

Q: That's when you taught at Monroe.

A: Mmhmm.

Q: That you could see them building that one from outside your house.

A: Yes. Oh, I went in...I just asked Mr. Wilkinson...I used to go see how far they would...how much they had done the night before...or the day before on the building. And so Mr. Wilkinson was there, and I said, "Oh, Mr. Wilkinson, how about a job? You know, I was...so the next day he called me and could I

just...and I had never taught this grade, but I loved it. I just enjoyed every bit of it. And...anyway, going...going back to...to the reading part...it's very gratifying when...when you have people coming in and really learn something and you know that you were...that you were the one that helped for that person to really know that he could do it. This boy was so thrilled.

Q: You can tell how much they appreciate just by the fact that these...

A: Oh they...

Q: ...few k...all of these kids...most...a great many of 'em keep in contact with you even today.

A: Yes, I...I do a lot. Of course I've lived here all the time, so they know me. You know, I feel like a pillar of the town.

Q: That leads to my last question. You lived and worked and raised a family in Madison Heights for sixty-five years. That's a long time for one community. What is it about Madison Heights that kept you here all these years?

A: Well, I think my...my teaching. You know, I...I had so much respect for the community and the community has respect for me. Um...when...wherever I go, I have a...I...I have a warm feeling and I bought my home here and I raised my family here and I just felt like part of this...part of my life. Just part of living.

Q: Do any of the Historical Commission members have any questions that they'd like to ask Mrs. Hennessey?

DB: Yeah. What was your maiden name?

Q: Your name please?

A: Oh, my maiden name?

DB: Darlene.

Q: Darlene Berendt?

DB: Mmhmm.

Q: Okay.

A: My maiden name was Helen Dzienis. "Dzie" means "day" in Polish. I'm Polish.

CS: How do you spell that?

A: Pardon?

CS: How do you spell that?

A: D-Z-I-E-N-I-S. Dzienis. The “dz” is the “j” sound.

Q: Anyone else?

LM: I think that Helen should put on record the year that she got her degree.

Q: This is Lois Myers.

LM: Lois Myers. She mentioned a certificate, but then, remember, you had to go back and get your degree. Tell ‘em what year, ‘cause somebody we met years ago might think that she never did have one. She did.

A: Oh, I think I...I think I said that...I...

Q: Go ahead. Give it to us anyway.

A: I...I think I r...received it in 1956.

Q: 1956. And you went to several schools. Eastern Michigan...

A: Yeah.

Q: ...U of D, Wayne...

A: Wayne...and...Michigan.

Q: Michigan? And Wayne.

A: Yeah, yeah. Well, that’s it.

Q: Yeah.

A: And U of D, did you mention that?

Q: Yep. U of D too.

CS: Whatever happened...

Q: Connie. Connie Schmelzle.

CS: Oh. Whatever happened to Harry Wheeler [inaudible]?

LM: Kenneth Wheeler.

CS: K...Kenneth.

A: I don't know if he probably moved away. But I also had another...another person whose name was Dwight—I was gonna say “Dwight Eisenhower”—but it was Dwight Ellison. And he could not read a word. But he knew more about science...he was a listener. And he was also in junior high. But I had him when he was like from the second grade on. He would come to my home. And he graduated from high school with...with honors. But he said he didn't have to know how to read. His father didn't know how to read, so why should he learn how to read. That attitude, you know. But there were...there were many...there...there were many instances that were just special.

Q: Well thank you very much for talking to us this evening. You've added another treasure to our historical collection.

A: Oh it was my pleasure. It was a delight. I...I'm glad it's over.

END OF INTERVIEW