

Interviewers: Maddux Rodgers, James Wartenbe, and Donovan Zunan

Interviewee: Shirley Wilhelmsen

HBR Modern US History

4 December 2025

Oral History of Hinckley Residents - Transcription

Maddux: Can you share your experiences growing up?

Shirley: Well, they might be similar to some of you. I don't know if any of you are farm children. I lived on a farm, and my first two years of school were in a one-room schoolhouse; it actually had two rooms. We had a gymnasium-type room. We had outdoor plumbing and a stove that warmed the rooms. However, if you had to be by the window, it was not a good place. My parents bought a farm and moved to a different town. It had a much bigger school, probably not as big as this. The high school was probably 275 to 300 people for the entire school when I graduated. And now they have 1,390 in that school. My class was the smallest one in the high school. We had 34 people graduate that year. And I was in Girl Scouts for a few years, but I was in 4-H for a lot more years. And I had one sister.

James: Why did you decide to become a teacher?

Shirley: I don't know. The University of Illinois has something called the University of Illinois Extension Program. It's kind of like teaching, except that you're doing it for a community, you're doing it for adults. It's a lifelong kind of teaching experience. And that's what I thought I really wanted to do. My guidance counselor in college thought that I really should consider going into teaching because the people who worked at the Extension Service did these programs at night. So if you had a family, and especially if you have a young family, you probably don't want to be gone every evening. So I thought that made sense. I went into student teaching. The Pekin School District interviewed me and offered me a job. I didn't even go out interviewing any place else. I never even pursued other careers and in hindsight I'm thinking I probably would have been happier doing something else. I enjoyed teaching. I still enjoy teaching, everything we've ever done is around teaching in some way. But I didn't like the discipline part.

Donovan: How long did you teach?

Shirley: Seven years. I taught at Pekin for two years, which is in central Illinois, and then my roommate was moving up here and I came along. I got a job at St. Charles, she got a job in Wheaton, and we moved to West Chicago.

Maddux: What did you find valuable about what you taught your students?

Shirley: I taught them something that was useful for the rest of their lives. Food classes, sewing classes, about child development so they could be a better parent. Also family living, budgeting, and consumer education.

Donovan: What Brought you to Hinckley?

Shirley: My husband and I saw this ad for a three-bedroom house. It wasn't supposed to be listed yet but the lady owner wanted to sell quickly. They had three small children and her husband had already moved to a new location in another state. I don't think she had shown it more than once or twice, but she was done with it. I think that's how we got the house. We liked it. It was only three years old and in good condition. The quality of the workmanship looked good, so that's how we ended up here.

James: How long have you lived in Hinckley?

Shirley: 52 years in the same house too. Fortunately, it was pretty new when we bought it, so we've only recently had to do some things to keep it in good shape.

Maddux: How has Hinckley changed over the years?

Shirley: Well, there were a lot more businesses here when we came. I mean, if you go uptown now, you know there are empty storefronts. There was a hardware store uptown next to The Good Times Grill. The owner relocated to the lot west of what is now Casey's. Sleeth's Electric has since constructed a building in front of what was the hardware store. The Hardware store was wonderful. If they didn't have what you wanted, they could find it and have it for you the next day. You didn't have to drive someplace else. We didn't have as many options of places to eat as we do now, but we had a furniture store. We bought our first living room furniture from the store here in town. We had a bakery, We've had a bakery on and off since then, but there was a well-established bakery, and they served lunch. There was a clothing store for women, there was a fabric store, and there were two banks. I don't know if there have been two banks during your lifetime. I can't remember when the state bank, which became fifth third, closed. But it might have been gone before you were old enough to pay attention to banks. And there was a pharmacy next to the cafe.

Anyway, I think that more people work out of town today than when we first moved here. Their jobs used to be in town so more people tended to volunteer for things than they do today. The Lions Club was here when we started and is still here. But there was men's softball leagues. There was a very active Junior Women's Club, which still does the breakfast with the Easter Bunny and breakfast with Santa. But they did lots of projects for the town. Also there was a women's club. They would have programs once a month you could attend and then they'd go on a theater trip once a year. We used to have a fall festival where they actually closed Route 30, and Maple Street. There were lots of craft booths.

Donovan: Why did you decide to become a librarian?

Shirley: The library had an opening on Thursdays for a person to work a few hours which fit my schedule. I would just check out books, shelve books, and help people find things. Then the librarian left and I became librarian in 1989. I served in that role for 21 years.

Maddux: How has technological impacted the organization and function of the library?

Shirley: There's pressure to always get the newest technology, but budgets are a limiting factor. We went from just books to supplementing them with cassettes, then CDs and now e-books. Movies are a big thing so we had VHS tapes and then DVDs. I think some libraries have streaming services where you can actually check out movies. Space has been our library's biggest limiting factor. We have worked for years to get a bigger library which is now going to happen.

James: How did the Garden Walk Committee help the library?

Shirley: Well, it was a means of fundraising. I like gardening just as much as I like reading. So I was all in with the idea. I had attended one in Rockford, and that one was also for their library. And so we did a garden walk four different times. The friends of the library were really the group that conducted it. Most of the people who had the gardens that were in the walk were not really library users, but they became library supporters from participating in that project.

Maddux: What are some of your favorite places to travel?

Shirley: Well, I love New England. It's beautiful in the fall and I love the fall colors. We go out there about every three years. I think it's about time we go someplace out east. And you can learn a lot about history while you're there, but I find it interesting when you can kind of live it. But we also go to Florida in the winter and to Arizona once a year because we have two granddaughters there. They're 10 and 11 now. So we don't see them nearly enough.