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Grace Green Shields

Grace Green Shields '17
Illinois Wesleyan University

Rachel Sheilds Scott

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Oral History Interview with Grace Green Shields,
In South Haven, Michigan, September 4th, 1976
Conducted by Rachel Shields Scott

Rachel Shields Scott: In South Haven, Michigan. This is an interview with Grace Green Shields, by her daughter Rachel Shields Scott. We're going to talk on this side of the tape, especially about Grace's recollection about her early days in Bloomington and around Illinois Wesleyan University. What are some of the earliest things you remember about the- the campus being across the street from the street from you there? What was the address?

Grace Green Shields: 1214 N. East Street. And my earliest recollection- of course, I was born in 1895 on the- in that house across from the Wesleyan, so it was always there. I don't remember anything else. And about us being connected with the Wesleyan, one of the earliest things that I remember myself- my sisters talking about my mother was when my sister Rachel was born on the fourteenth of September of 19- 1897, that professed- that was enrollment day at the Wesleyan, and that the students were saying to each other, "Professor Green got another girl."

Scott: [laughs] And this was the fifth?

Shields: That was the fifth daughter in the family, and the old- and my mother never had a blue-eyed boy, which she- which she had always wanted. And the next thing I remember about Bloomington really, there was a big fire in 19- bout 1900. In 1902, in June was a big storm.

Scott: During- in June?

Shields: In June of 1902, and when we got up the next morning, we couldn't see across the campus-

Scott: Hmm.

Shields: -because there were so many trees they were toppled at that time. And my father died in 19- December of 1902, and some time before that, I know- I remember it was his habit, one of the nice things he did for the children, was to take over there to the observatory, which was close to the academy where he taught when he first came to Bloomington and we would be able to see the stars.

Scott: Hmm.

Shields: Now, I can't remember that observatory in my later years there at Wesleyan. I think probably the building must have been torn down by then. But my father taught astronomy and was head- head of the academy at first. Then he taught mathematics in the Wesleyan University.

Scott: That's interesting. I knew about his teaching math, but I never knew about his teaching astronomy, and one of my early memories is of you taking us out in the backyard, lying us on a blanket, and teaching us the constellations and I had no idea that your knowledge went back to- to Grandad's teaching astronomy.

Shields: I don't know that it did. I mean, it seems as if your knowledge of constellations was something you just grow up with it-

Scott: That you grow up with.

Shields: -and you don't remember learning about it.

Scott: Mm-hmm.

Shields: And then- I can't remember much about Wesleyan except that I lived next door to- we lived next door to Professor Summerville, who was the English teacher. And all during my sister Mary's four years at Wesleyan, and during my four years at Wesleyan, we served as his mimeograph user. We did typing for him, and that was the way we earned our way through school. In Wesleyan, the...I remember very well Professor Hedinger, who taught philosophy, and one day he asked the class, "How did it happen that we decided to go to college?" Well, Wesleyan was right across the street from where we lived, and we went to college just like we would go to high school. Without any thought, it was my mother. My mother and father had always had in their dreams that all of the girls and all of the children would get a college education, that that was something they couldn't take care of or couldn't take away from us.

Scott: Yes, and this- this in the early 1900s was a big dream.

Shields: One time- so when I was at Wesleyan, that was between 1913 and 1917. I remember this Professor Hedinger asking our class, "Why did we go to college? What was our idea?" And he came to me, and I said, "Well, I don't know." I said, "I don't have any dream. I just went- that was just a matter of recourse. We went to Wesleyan after we finished high school." And "Well," he said, "Your mother had a dream then." And of course, the Wesleyan was very good to us 'cause of my father's having taught there, they gave us half tuition for all five of us to get through school. Other things that happened at Wesleyan- I had Professor Austin for Latin and that proved to be my major, and Professor Ferguson for French and German, and Professor [Alfred William] Homberger for chemistry. That was in the science office just right across the

street from our house. Our house is not there anymore, where we were all born. They were just part of campus, and I think there's no building actually on the address, but there is grass next-next to a building, and I thought sometimes that that should have a plaque out there, "This is Green Grass," capital G, capital G. [Scott laughs] And, well, anyway, the- we- we- all of five of us finished at Wesleyan. When I was a junior, I was on the Annual staff. I remember that very well, and I remember too as a freshman- this is one of the things. Wesleyan was a Methodist school and was known for its religious influences, and I went to Wesleyan right out of high school, and of course my attendance at- at the First Methodist church in Bloomington. And when I was a freshman, the freshmen sat in the side rooms- pews during Chapel, which was required four days a week, and the seniors sat right across from us in the center section at the front, then the junior back of them and the sophomores back of them. The side wings were all for freshmen, freshmen girls on one side and boys on the other. And one time, we were bent over during prayer- it was the custom then of bending clear over and putting our forehead on the back of the pew in front. And I know we must have looked very pious to any visiting ministers. [Scott laughs] And one time, somebody- a senior said to me, "Grace! Grace! There's a bug on you!" and the shock was not that I had a bug on me, which was- what was current on the Wesleyan campus, all fall. It was one of our problems, was not that she saw that there was a bug on me but that she saw it during prayer. Of all times- of all times, I thought she would be leaning over with her eyes shut. But I found out by the time that I was- had been there a little while, that I was- that nobody closed their eyes during prayer. We all sat there either whispering or studying, while we were bent over and- and looking so good. That- I remember that especially my freshman year.

Scott: That was kind of a rude awakening then, wasn't it?

Shields: Oh yes, it was. One of those things just growing up and the real life- well, the real life. And other things about the Wesleyan, I was a member of the Kappa sorority.

Scott: Were all of your sisters also Kappas?

Shields: All- all of my sisters were Kappas. I was a legacy. I was the fourth to be made a Kappa, and that was an awfully fine group of girls I thought. The fact is enjoyed that a lot, and fact is a lot of the social life in a small school like that was based on sororities and fraternities. There wasn't really much of a college social activity.

Scott: So, how much was Wesleyan's enrollment?

Shields: I think of it as being around two hundred enrollment, and whether it was as large as that or whether it was larger, that's my memory. That's how big it was.

Scott: So the classes were pretty small.

Shields: Oh yes, they were. And- or I remember Professor [Cliff] Guild, I had to- I took all the mathematics that- that the school offered, and I was pretty good in mathematics. But now, I have a son that's a mathematics professor and writes mathematics textbooks, and I- I can't read them at all. [both laugh] And nobody in the family can.

Scott: Nobody can, huh?

Shields: And- and I- at the end of my senior year, there was one- one student- one graduate selected to receive a scholarship- or a fellowship, I guess you would call it, to the University of Illinois for graduate work and I was- I was the one that received that and I went to the University of Illinois and-

Scott: There was just one each year from the graduating class?

Shields: One each year. So I took- majored in Latin, because that was- I had eight years of Latin and that's what I was planning to teach, and that was the only subject that I had enough credits in to go for a Masters, and so I accepted that with grateful acceptance, and I went to the University of Illinois and- and there, I had- it was the rule of the school that if you majored in Latin, you minored in Greek. If you min- majored in Greek, you minored in Latin. And I had had no Greek at all at Wesleyan and I was required to take beginning Greek which counted nothing towards my Masters degree at all. It was an undergraduate subject and I thought would be terribly dry, but I had Dr. [William A.] Oldfather there, who was a great teacher and he made Greek li- li- live. I thought there- there isn't such a thing as a dead language.

Scott: Hmm.

Shields: That was the outstanding thing of my year at Illinois, was having that Greek course under Dr. Oldfather, and thankful that I was- that I had the Greek. I'm sorry that I hadn't taken more.

Scott: One of the things that I think wove your family into the- into the Wesleyan scene all those years was your mother running a boarding- boarding house.

Shields: Yes, a boarding house, yes. After my father died, she had the house made modern. We had no bathroom or- we had a furnace put in then, and running water, a bathroom put in upstairs, and gaslights. They were wonderful. And-

Scott: This was 1902 or shortly-

Shields: Well, it was 1910 I think before she got to that. She decided that that was going to be her best way to make a living, because that would keep her at home, and my sisters- older sisters were teenagers and she felt that they- she didn't want to be away from home. She tried for a little while to sell insurance, but it- that took her out so much in evenings, so she decided to do something that would keep her at home. And so she began having roomers and boarders, and... but she was able to feed several people extra besides those that roomed at our house. So several from the neighborhood roomed in the neighborhood. Then she brought in boys, student boys who came and ate at our house. So it made a very pleasant table. We just had a real good time at the table, and as we grew up as children and some of us began leaving home, that would make one more space to take in another roomer. So all through high school, or all through, yes, all through high school and college, we had- I- I remember we had roomers. One of my- my roommates during the time, still lives in Bloomington, was Anne McLean, and I don't remember. Elaine Strayer was one. She's been gone quite a while, and- and these boys- well, Loyal Thompson was one of those that ate at our house. He roomed next door. He was a Methodist minister there in Bloomington and a graduate of Wesleyan. He was in the- in a class with one of my sisters.

Scott: Well, in all of this, did- a lot of your time was spent in helping with this big project of feeding so many people.

Shields: Yes. That was- that was my main introduction to cooking, and- and housework, of course was doing dishes and helping- helping get the dinner ready. So my- I didn't really learn much in- when it came to making something like pie or cakes or something that really needed a skill to cook, my mother didn't let that go to the children. We did the- we did the dishwashing and the vegetable preparation and so forth and so on. And we had- so that was always nice and this was of course before we had bloomers, 'cause we didn't have bloomers until we had running water. And we had a big place for cooks to open in the kitchen, and I was too young to handle the ironing much, but I remember the big griddle that we had that when you sat down her three-two lids would be on the stove, and we had irons- rows of irons in there, and you kept changing the iron as the iron kept cooling off.

Scott: These were flat irons.

Shields: And I would be- my mother would let me iron shirts or sheets. Careful ironing I was too young for, but I could iron a sheet. And then also in the- in the coal stove age, I remember the base burner that we had in the living room with icy glass windows that were- that made it very pleasant, and we had two big doors between the living room and the parlor, and those were always closed in the winter 'cause the base burner didn't heat the parlor very well. And then in the room- the cabinet in my father's study, was another stove. That- that wasn't- that didn't have any icy glass, but it was a good heating stove. And boy, I remember there. Of course, in every room they had a- lamps, and that was another thing. I was never allowed to carry a lamp. My

mother was always afraid that the smaller children would fall with a lamp and start a fire. But in every room, there would always be matches. They always were handy to take care of the stove-lamps. And for a long time, my sister and I had a- started in my father's study. That was when my father was still living, and we lit a paper in the wastebasket. And that was fun. We lit the paper and blew out the paper- blew out the fire. Then, all of a sudden, that fire got beyond us. We weren't able to roll it out and we began to scream and my mother came running in there and there was that wastebasket ablaze. And she picked that up in her hand, and ran through the dining room into the kitchen and put it in the sink and pumped water on it to put out the fire.

Scott: Oh my!

Shields: And I don't remember any- getting any punishment for that, but we were punished severely because it had been my father's Christmas present.

Scott: Oh, the basket.

Shields: The basket. Yeah, and we burned it. Oh, I remember another time when we had a fire. That was after we had roomers, I think. Oh, I'm not sure. Anyway, it must have been before we had roomers because I think we had a pipe that went up from my father's study from that stool through the bedroom overhead and he from that pipe- that pipe would be- move into the chimney then up there, and the pipe heated that room, and we had a fire. That was when my sister Zola was a student at Wesleyan, I remember, and she had a new hat, a brown velvet hat with some plumes on it. And my sister Ruth- she was the second in the family, ran upstairs to rescue that new hat of Zola's.

Scott: That was the most important thing!

Shields: That was the most important thing and we kept it under the bed, and that was where you kept hat boxes. We didn't- well, we didn't have much in the way of closets, and so she ran up there and got that hat and brought it down and rescued it from the fire. Well, the fire wasn't that bad. But I think that that fire must've been- well, I can't remember whether my father was still living or not. I don't know about that. I just don't remember. But I remember the place and that hat.

Scott: How much do you remember about your father?

Shields: Well, not very much. I remember I was seven. I was seven when he died and my sister Rachel was five, and I could remember asking my father if I could go and play with a neighbor's child and I remember his answer would be "Ask your mother." And then I would ask my mother if I could go and play with this neighbor's child and her answer would be "Ask your father." And

that was about as much as I really- I remember seeing my father at the table, or hearing him say the blessing. I don't- my first memory of that is my mother at the time.

Scott: People were interested in the early days of Wesleyan. Why don't you say a little bit about who your father was and we can-

Shields: Well, my father was a graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University in 1885, and- and- oh yes, Ohio Wesleyan, he was near Findlay, Ohio, that was Hancock county, and he had been a country school teacher there and had taught at the country school that my mother attended. She was in his class, and it was a big feather in her hat when she dated the teacher of the school.

Scott: Wow.

Shields: She was five years younger than my father, and they were married in 1885, and his first job was principal of the Science Grove Seminary at Roberts, Kentucky. And they went down there- they were there five years, and that was where my sisters Zola and Ruth were both born. And then he got this job of being principal of the academy at the Wesleyan in 1900 to teach when they bought the house. Well, I think they lived there a year or E. Jefferson Street or some place before they bought the house on campus. And we lived in that house until then- my mother died, so that was our home and her home until 1949, and the Wesleyan bought it then and used it as a house for faculty until they tore it down, and used the space for school buildings. And my father- see, there were two- there were three Methodist churches in Wesleyan- in Bloomington. The First Methodist Church down on Washington Street, Washington and East, and the Grace Methodist about Locust and East, and then the Park Methodist out near Miller Park. And the Grace Methodist, being closer to the Wesleyan than any of the others, the tendency was for the faculty to attend church at the Grace Church. So when my father came to town, he was asked to go the First Methodist Church-

Scott: In order to spread-

Shields: -in order to spread the faculty around a little bit. So we attended the First Methodist Church. Well, he became superintendent of the Sunday School, and I do kind of remember about him being superintendent of the Sunday School there. When he was still superintendent there, they gave him a chair. We had a big mahogany rocker in our house that- Wesleyan the Sunday School had presented to my father for his years of service there. I remember they played- they had a little orchestra in the Sunday School there. One man played the trombone and my sister Zola played the piano at Sunday School. And I sat there in mortal terror thinking that trombone was going to hit her...[Scott laughs]...that trombone player would extend the trombone and I'm sure it was going to punch Zola, but it never did. But that's my memory of that Sunday School,

that trombone player. And Mr. Welty, Sam Welty (sp?) , was- I think he was connected with the Wesleyan for a long time, and I remember he presented that chair to my father.

Scott: What's become of that chair?

Shields: Well, that chair we gave away to the young man, and I should re- I can't remember his name, but he roomed with my mother for years and he became a Methodist minister.

Scott: Oh.

Shields: What was his name? I can't remember. Anyway, he lived in some town not too far from Bloomington, and so when my sisters were emptying my mother's house, they asked if he would like to have that chair. So, it was an awfully nice rocker. I remember-

Scott: When did you say your parents came to-

Shields: Wesleyan?

Scott: Yeah.

Shields: In 1890.

Scott: 1890.

Shields: Yes, and then my sister Mary was born there in 1892. I was born in 1895, and my sister Rachel in 1897.

Scott: So he was there for quiet some-

Shields: Yes, for about fifty years. Yes. Uh-huh. And we always liked Bloomington. We liked the Wesleyan and I remember there was a great big stone, and I don't think that stone is there anymore. A big stone on the campus of Wesleyan, and that was a gathering place. People would come in the summer at one or two and sit on that stone or stand around there for having visits among the students at Wesleyan. And I don't know anything about what kind of stone that was or where it came from, but that was one of the land- landmarks at Wesleyan.

Scott: You don't know if it's still there?

Shields: I'm remembering that stone, and- and the storm of 1902, that there were five towers, four in each- one in each corner and one in the center over the front door of the Wesleyan, and the big center tower was blown down. [building being referred to is Old Main]

Scott: Hmm.

Shields: And after that there was just four towers. And then finally- that was after my day there, the Wesleyan had a fire so it became only the- the basement was all they- roofed the basement and used that for quite a while and that was all [indistinct] more classrooms.

Scott: One of the things I remember from my childhood in visiting Bloomington- I remember a lot of things about that old house, that it was a real landmark, and I remember the tennis across the street-

Shields: Oh yes!

Scott: -and in this day and age, when women's athletics are just getting geared up and going, I think your experience in tennis was especially interesting.

Shields: That is interesting because- well, my father loved tennis. So the children- as we came along, he taught us all how to play tennis and we were almost given a racket at our birth, and so we played tennis a lot over there. And then when my sister Rachel and I played tennis- well, we- we were just two years apart in school. But we played tennis, and finally we had a tennis- well, we didn't have any girl's athletics at all that was our own, but the- but Millikin, these girls at Millikin University decided to have an intercollegiate tennis tournament, the Little Nineteen, I remember nineteen colleges that were in that tournament, and they wrote a letter to Wesleyan and wanted to know if we- they could re- represent us and play tennis with them. Well, somehow we heard about that and we urged the Wesleyan to send us. We thought we were good enough to just go to that tournament. So finally after much persuasion, that- that was in 1917-

Scott: You didn't have any Title IX behind you then.

Shields: We didn't have any Title IX, anything behind us then, and no athletic funds or anything, but at the same time you had to pay your fare on the inter-urban to get to the- Millikin. I didn't know if there was any entrance fee or not, but we finally persuaded Wesleyan to pay our way to Millikin to play, and my sister Rachel and I entered as doubles and Elaine Strayer entered as singles. And in the first round- I think it was the first round, Elaine was defeated. It might have been the second round. She was awfully good. But Rachel and I beat- we won that tournament. There were only four schools that entered, and I remember that ride back on that Inter-Urban that

day. We were pinching ourselves. We said that we couldn't believe. [Scott laughs] Well, we got a cup for that...[Scott laughs]...and we also got a Wesleyan sweater with a W on that.

Scott: Oh!

Shields: I have a picture of myself wearing that sweater and holding my racket. The racket that I cost five dollars, and that was a big- that was an expensive racket, and it meant a lot to my mother to be willing to let one of us spend five dollars for a racket.

Scott: That was a lot of meals served.

Shields: And I know the reason Rachel and I did so well in the tournament over the other girls that entered the tournament was that we had played together for so long. We knew exactly what to expect the other one to do in that tennis, and that was something you can't learn after just two or three years of college. But I look back now- I think now about the girls just now getting equal treatment in high schools and colleges for their sports, and the persuasion that it took at that time to get the Wesleyan to send us to Decatur to play in that tournament.

Scott: That was a real highlight.

Shields: That was a highlight in our lives.

Scott: Do you know whether there was any girls' intercollegiate tennis after that?

Shields: I don't know whether there was again or not. But they- I just- I just didn't keep up. I doubt it because I think it would have ruined- probably no doubt now it has intercollegiate athletics for those schools in the Wesleyan's conference, whatever the conference is now. But the- it takes a long time for those things- my school in South Haven- our schools in South Haven, the girls were pleading with the board of education to let them have equal time with the boys on the tennis courts, now in 1970, or in this age, and I look back in 1917, that- that struggle was just starting and we weren't very success- we weren't very successful at it.

Scott: Yeah. It's taken a long way- a long time to come-

Shields: Yeah.

Scott: -as far as we've come.

Shields: Yes.

Scott: Well, I think we're getting near the end of the tape. We have a few more minutes. Do you have anything to add as far as Wesleyan or Bloomington or anything like that?

Shields: Oh, there's one little thing I remember as a child. This is when my father was still living, but he wasn't very well, and it was not the custom then because this is not Wesleyan at all. It has nothing to do with it, except the custom at the time- let's see, that would be around 1902, that if you had a death in the family, you put a bouquet of flowers or a ribbon on your front door.

Scott: Alright.

Shields: And you passed the house that had this bouquet of flowers, that meant death was in that house. And so I had some nice ribbons, some, somehow or another I'd come into- found them in the house or something, and I made a nice big bow of them and put them on our front door, and our neighbor Mr. Buck came over to see my father, and he knew my father wasn't well, and he came over to the front door and there was this bouquet of ribbons. He thought my father had died, and he- he hadn't heard about it. Well, he went back home saying was "Professor Green- Professor Green died." And he...he then came to the side door to make sure that my father was still living and I remember being in his favor at that time for having done that. Think of putting flowers on our door or ribbons on our door, because that would indicate to the public- and with my father in the physical condition that he was, it would mean something to the passerby but I didn't realize that. I- I may not have realized that the flowers meant death.

Scott: It's just that sometimes you saw them on the door.

Shields: Yes. But I can remember that very well.

Scott: Do you remember- it was your Uncle George who was the doctor when he-

Shields: Yes, when he died in Findlay, Ohio. Yes, and my sister Rachel and I stayed at North Baltimore with my Uncle George and my Aunt Esther while my mother and father- well, my mother was with my father and my grandparents. I took things from the Pantagraph of my father's death and my father's history at Wesleyan, and Wesleyan meant home, and it was part of us as we grew up.

Scott: Part of your whole family experience.

Shields: The whole family, yes.

Scott: Alright.