

DATE TK, 2020 – ERNA SCHNEIDER HOOVER

KG – Kayt Gochenaur

EH – Erna Hoover

KG – Here we go. The recording is on and, just to go over it again, I record these conversations and we keep them as part of our collection, as part of our record of the history of the Saranac Lake area. If you are ok with it, I'd love to be able to put it online as well but if you're not ok with that then that's fine too.

EH – I'm perfectly happy to put it online.

KG – Fantastic. I will mark that box here and say that it's ok to put it on the Oral History Project website. Can you just state your name and age for the record?

EH – Yes my name is Erna Hoover and I am 94 years old.

KG – Tell me about that first year that you attended the Girl Scout camp on Upper Saranac Lake.

EH – Well, it was the first year it was open. Now I don't know, have you ever been over there? Do you know what it looks like?

KG – I know a little bit, yes.

EH – It's a gorgeous camp and the word 'camp' was used instead of estate. But it was originally the estate 'camp' of Eli Morton who was the Lieutenant Governor of the state of New York. It had been sold to another family named Harold Graves. Harold Graves has another distinction. He is the man who owned the most expensive watch that was ever made. He and his wife had a couple of sons and they were big game hunters. You will find if you go into the lodge there all sorts of (there were) stuffed animals and there was a large moose over the fireplace. There were other animals that you do not see in the Adirondacks. But those sons I think died and so they had no children until they gave that camp/estate to the Girl Scout camp of the district, which is the council which is in – Orange is in – Maplewood, New Jersey. That is a suburban district and so it was a very specific district and it was like no other Girl Scout camp I ever knew of.

The main part of the camp today, and then, consisted of very large buildings largely built with logs. There is a gorgeous view out over the lake. They were raised up so you could see well above a lot of the trees to the lake. There was a dining room again with a bunch of varied picture – I think it was octagonal almost – very large picture windows. Then a living room with a very large fireplace and a very large moose head over it and other stuffed animals and a so-called family cabin where the family lived. Again, all done in this rustic but very lovely Adirondack style. I think this camp had... I do not know when it was built, I would have to think somewhere in 1880 or so. People would pack a steamer trunk if they lived in New York or Boston and go up there and live there for the summer. It was THE place to go for a long time. By

the late 30s Mr. and Mrs. Harold Graves – and they were there when they dedicated the camp – they gave this camp and it’s an island in the middle of Upper Saranac Lake with about 24 acres all of woodlands. The Girl Scouts were delighted and they opened it as a camp.

Eventually, typically Girl Scout camps have wooden... tents with a wooden platform floor and canvas. Over time there were a number of those tent units scattered around the island. In addition to that in those days there was a program called Girl Scout Mariners where sailing and sea lore was the main kind of activity so there is a boathouse there. The boathouse was out over the lake, built out over the lake, and there is a large upper area there, a very large porch. The Girl Scout Mariners had their cots on that porch. A couple of them got sent home sometime over the years. I don’t know that it happened the first year but a couple of them were jumping out over the railing into the water and the water is not very deep there so they were sent home for bad behavior. We had a couple of sailboats. Again, I don’t think that happened the first year but we did ultimately have a couple of sailboats. We sailed Saranac. I remember that we had... the Girl Scouts like a lot of camps had a lot of camp songs and like to sing and I do remember sailing a couple of those boats, about 10 of us maybe. They were big enough to hold about 5-6 people apiece. I remember sailing down to the little island where the chapel is and I don’t know whether that is still there. I have not been there lately.

KG – The original chapel burned down but there is a new chapel there.

EH – Well ok so we constituted the choir sometimes down there. I remember one time one of the women who had come to service invited us all over to her camp for ice cream afterwards.

KG – Do you know which camp it was?

EH – No I don’t. I can’t remember. Maurice Evans who was a great Shakespearean actor stayed on Saranac at some time. We used to do our own.... We had a very great counselor for music and drama. Again, I’m telling you about... I was there for 6 years. From the time I was 12 until I think 18. I’m telling you things I remember and not particularly having to do with the first year. So we did... I remember doing the Pirates of Penzance and Pinafore and doing acts out of Shakespeare. We invited Maurice Evans over to hear us do an act from Shakespeare from one of his plays. He very politely said: “Well, very good.” It was wonderful.

We had a dedication ceremony the first year and the Graves came to that. The counselor who was really very gifted wrote a dedication ceremony. I don’t think the movies exist anymore. I wish... if they did they are somewhere in the Girl Scout records. I don’t have them at home. My father took a movie camera to record that.

Now Girl Scout camps run in two-week units so that if someone can’t afford to send somebody for the whole summer they nevertheless can get a two-week period of camping. A number of us however were able to stay for the whole summer. The biggest activities were water activities: swimming, and especially canoeing. Those of us who stayed over a long time got to be sufficiently good enough at canoeing that we would go down to Old Forge and go through the Fulton chain and up through Raquette Lake, Long Lake, and back into Upper Saranac. The younger kids who were able to simply go for a night, would go up to some of the little islands by Follensby Clear Pond and so forth and just stay one night. In fact I think some of

those kids were taken to some beaches, which I don't remember doing. I remember canoeing into Follensby Clear Pond and some of the other ponds around there.

KG – Do you remember... can you tell me anything about the other camps that were on the lake at the time? I know there were some beautiful old camps out there.

EH – No because we were just there on that island and as I said when we left we left largely for isolated camping places. They had a mail boat that came down the lake. That mail boat stopped in different places. Our loading dock from the shore was at Gilpin Bay. We had a big old Chris-Craft among other boats to lug the substantial amount of food and stuff over to the island. I've read accounts of various of the girls who were there who regarded it as a magical place as I did.

KG – Tell me some of your fondest memories.

EH – Well, a couple of them: Another girl and I were particularly athletic. The counselors never caught us at this activity. When we would be camping over at Follensby Clear Pond or one of those ponds we decided to swing birches. To swing a birch you climb up in the birch and you find a branch that is strong enough to let you down but weak enough to let you down. You grab onto that branch and push off and it bends down and it lets you down to the beach. That is not an activity that the counselors would have approved of. There is a poem by Robert Frost that says 'When I see birches bend to left and right, Across the lines of straighter darker trees, I like to think some boy's been swinging them.' I don't think this activity was something original with us but we never heard of anybody else doing that. We managed that one on our own. Except one time I grabbed a branch that was a little too weak and I fell about 5 feet and knocked the wind out of me.

KG – My goodness.

EH – I clearly remember that. Some of the greatest times were on these long canoe trips. I remember one trip we would do the portages necessary ourselves and we had very heavy old canoes. You couldn't damage them very well they were so heavy. They were Old Town canoes. It would take two of us to portage some of those. On some of those long trips... I remember one long trip where it rained and poured the night before we were to come home. We stayed in the Adirondack lean-tos that were along those routes. We were coming back on a Sunday morning when it finally was clear. The sky was clear and the water was calm. To this day I remember what a glorious day it was. A lot of these... the Oranges (there is East Orange, West Orange, South Orange, and Orange) so the girls came from all those places but a number of them came from South Orange and Maplewood where I grew up so we came from the same Girl Scout unit. So saw each other every day every week in the winter as well. Some of those girls I stayed friends with as long as they were around. Needless to say at this age some of them aren't around anymore.

KG – To clarify, what were the years that you attended?

EH – Well I think the first year was '38 and so when I was 12 and I was a junior counselor I think at 18 so those six years.

KG – So you would have been attending during World War II.

EH – Yes.

KG – Did you all hear news of the war while you were out on the island or were you isolated from news?

EH – I heard plenty of news about the war at home and not much about it there. My mother probably sent me some parts of the New York Times. In those days you could wash your clothes there but you could also... there were things called laundry cases. You put all your clothes in a laundry case and it was very inexpensive to ship it home. Then clean clothes would come back and again if you got treats in the way of sweets or candy or cookies they weren't keen on your getting a lot of that kind of thing but they would want you to share it with the other girls. I think in those laundry cases my mother... I had started... I went to South Mountain School in South Orange, NJ and by the 6th grade we were having about 20 minutes of current events every morning. Most of the time that I was at camp I was in high school, junior high and high school, so I was very much aware of what was going on in Europe. I do think my mother sent me parts of the New York Times. There wasn't any terrible effort to say much about the war there. At home... we were in South Orange, we had blackout curtains on our windows and our headlights... the top half of our headlights in the cars were painted black in order to eliminate the amount of glare that was in the sky because the Germans submarines hung outside New York Harbor. Ships headed for Europe were highlighted in the glare from the city so there was some effort to keep the light down. And of course we had rationing. Fat, butter, was rationed. Meat was rationed. When we were older people we were knitting watch caps and other kinds of things for soldiers overseas.

KG – Were any of your friends or family members drafted or did any enlist?

EH – I had no boys in my family. All the boys in high school when they turned 18 had to sign up for the draft. There were drafts – who actually was drafted and not – was set up locally. People could be excused from the draft if they were physically unable. During that war the country pulled.... Once the war started (before the war started there was a bunch of America First isolationist kind of people. Lindbergh, Colonel Lindbergh, was one of those) but once the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor everybody pulled together. It was most amazing. The unions would suggest ways to make the work go efficiently in the factories and an enormous number of young men were drafted and sent either to Europe or to the Pacific and so there were very few young men around by about a year after Pearl Harbor. When I finally graduated from high school in 1944 I worked in a defense plant and that defense plant was a little company on Valley Street in Maplewood that in peacetime made screening for windows and during the war they had a contract to make aluminum frames for holding electronic equipment for I think aircraft

and so on. I ran a drill press that summer. Also there was a shortage of labor of course because so many men were drafted and overseas and if not overseas then in camps training to go so actually the mothers... three of my mariner Girl Scout mothers actually who had never intended ever to do anything but be housewives went to work as supervisors in this little plant. They showed up every morning in overalls and worked just like everybody else. That's what I did in that year of '44 after I graduated from Columbia High School and before I went to college.

KG – With you talking about this I'm curious if having lived through such a world-changing event if it's changed your perspective at all on the current pandemic and this kind of upset that's happening right now? Does it give you a different perspective?

EH – Well I should say, I should also say that across the street from us lived a family and they had an only son who died in that war. Oh the other thing that happened was that Canadian.... New Zealand Air Force and Australian Air Forces trained in Canada before they were going overseas to England to fight the Germans. They were given... there was a club called the Anzac Club in New York City. They were given a small sum of money and allowed to go there on leave. So the mothers of the Girl Scout friends of mine would call up the Anzac Club and invite these young men (and they were all just some of them just off the Australian farms and ranches and sheep stations) and invite them home for the weekend. Then somebody... we would gather at one house and somebody would play the victrola and we'd dance. Each mother would put one of them up. I remember a number of those young men. Some of them sent Christmas cards to my mother as long as they lived.

KG – Oh my goodness.

EH – I even today still get a Christmas card from a man in Australia.

KG – Wow.

EH – At that point of course we were very much more international-minded because we were hearing of course what was going on in Germany of our troops. First the air war and the bombing in London and the air war over England and then the European invasion. Then the Pacific war. One of my friends who was also a Girl Scout married a man who had been in the Navy and his job was to deliver marines to the beaches all across the Pacific. A terrible job because he could deliver these men and see a bunch of them shot up almost immediately. He watched the really fervid way the Japanese defended all those islands. I at least was very interested in the world outside of the United States. As I say it was a time when everybody pulled together. People were asked to buy war bonds for example. Today looking at how completely divided the country is, is something that is totally different from what happened then. People sometimes say that was the good war because we were fighting the Nazis and the evil which they did and the Japanese in the same way.

KG – While you were at the Girl Scout camp those years did you find that a lot of other people... were people talking about the war and what was going on or was it just kind of an escape where you were out in the wilderness and not thinking about that so much?

EH – Well, for example we didn't even have a radio. I wouldn't say it was totally an escape because we had the same problems with not eating too much meat and all that kind of thing but current events were not discussed at camp.

KG – Another thing I'm curious about is if you were aware of the village of Saranac Lake as a tuberculosis center for TB patients. Was that something you were aware of at the time?

EH – I personally was aware of it but we never got... The Catholic girls were taken to a Catholic church, the other girls there was a sort of a scout's own religious ceremony on Sunday evening. I never saw Saranac Lake, the town, at all. The buses would... of course there wasn't any Northway and there wasn't any Thruway and the buses would leave at something like 7:30 in the morning from Orange, New Jersey and take 8 hours to get up to Gilpin Bay. And make a couple of pit stops on the way and we'd have our lunch provided to us on the bus. A couple of mothers would come and chaperone. I wasn't any where near civilization. I was either in camp or as I say one of the highlights was going on a 5-day canoe trip starting at Eighth Lake in the Fulton Chain. I haven't been back so I don't know how any of that kind of place is today. I ultimately married a man who spent seven years in the U.S. Navy and before the war he and his family would go to Fourth Lake I think. I remember after the war, sometime in the 50s going with him to see where he had stayed at Fourth Lake in the Fulton Chain.

My daughters – I have three daughters – spent some time at Eagle Island. I have a daughter who is 55ish I remember taking her up to camp and spending a weekend with her there when she was about 7 but that was the last time I have been at camp. I'm well aware of what's going on now and all the efforts that have had to happen in order to make this place go again. As you may know, the Girl Scouts are not as numerous as they used to be. I think the fact that girls can now participate in varsity sports in high school plus the push to get good grades so as to get into the college to their choice have made it much harder for high school girls to continue in Girl Scouts. The Brownies I think are more popular in the lower grades but there is so much pressure now on girls to participate in all these different other activities that are thought to be important to getting into college. So what happened is that the council – there was a council for the Oranges and another council for Summit New Providence which are nearby towns – and those two councils were collapsed. That council had a camp on the Delaware River and they didn't have enough campers to want to go to both places. They were trying to sell the camp up there in Saranac. It's obviously harder to get to obviously than an hour or 45 minute drive over to the Delaware River from New Jersey. Camping apparently was not... or the glories of that camp were not so apparent to people.

Really the thing that was most... I did sail I remember if you want to know about things I remember. I remember a sailboat race where I skippered one boat and another girl skippered the other boat and the betting was on her. Fortunately I managed to back wind the other boat and I won. The betting was that the other... everybody thought the other girl was going to win this thing.

KG – I'm a little curious about the canoe trips that you took up in the area. Can you tell me a bit about what type of gear you used? Now we have... I go on a lot of canoe trips but I know the gear today must be very different from what you were using back then so just describe how you packed food, what type of equipment you had.

EH – Well, we each had a bedroll with a poncho that was a waterproof poncho. But you had a bedroll that had sheets and rolled blankets in them. Each one of us. Our toiletries were in a little package that would hold a toothbrush and things of that kind, soap dishes. You would put maybe a couple of dry change of clothes or something in that. You had a poncho in case you had rain. As I say we had canoes that were made by Old Town. They were heavy wooden canoes and it took two girls to portage one of those. I can't remember which portage was the longest but there was a mile portage somewhere in that trip from Eighth Lake. It took two of us portage that and we carried our stuff. Then come back and portage the canoe. We had at least a counselor with us in all those trips and we cooked our food over fires near the Adirondack lean-tos where we would stay for the night. If it was a nice night of course we could stay and sleep out under the stars. What we cooked were the usual kinds of things that you can eat on a trip but there wasn't any sort of stuff that you put in a pot and all of a sudden you have a magic dinner. I can remember that they cooked for example oatmeal for breakfast and you could have bacon and eggs but not too many of those because of the war. Of course s'mores for dessert which were graham crackers with chocolate bars and marshmallows. You would do the marshmallow on a stick over the fire and get it toasted and put it on a graham cracker that has a chocolate bar with it.

KG – Did you have any meats?

EH – Yes, I think but not an awful lot. I have got any real recollection of like say roasting a chicken. I don't think we did that. I more nearly probably things like a sandwich with some lunch meat in it, that kind of thing

KG – Did you all every capsize?

EH – Did I what?

KG – Did you ever capsize the canoes?

EH – In order to go on one of these trips you had to be able to show your canoeing ability. One canoeing ability you did before you went was to deliberately capsize the canoe and then right it and be told of course to hang to it and stuff. You had to do that but I don't remember ever capsizing a canoe accidentally on a trip. These things are pretty.... Between the fact that you had someone paddling in the bow and someone paddling in the stern and you had kettles and stuff to cook with and then for your fuel you went and cut up some wood from the local forest there and you gathered pine, little bits of pine, and stuff like that for tinder. You had a hatchet to hack up some sticks to start a fire and you boiled stuff over a pot. Of course none of the clothing is the way it is now where you have this quick-dry stuff and tents and that kind of spring up, that

kind of thing. None of that. Paddles – well probably they are made out of different stuff than what they were then – they were made of wood.

KG – We still have some wood paddles. That is still the preferred method I think. My dad does a lot of canoeing and he likes to make his own paddles. Still those old wood paddles I think. The other thing I wanted to ask you about is to elaborate a little bit more about the dedication ceremony at the end of that first year. What all did it involve?

EH – It involved dedicating the camp to the idea of living again as close to nature as possible, which is a kind of funny thing if you think about the fact that we were living in this estate, which really was as luxurious as you can be and still be very close to nature. It is true that a number of us were sleeping in tents right close to the water or in the boathouse. The boathouse has been moved back onto land now but it was out in the water on pilings. I think there is a copy of that thing, that dedication, the opening part goes: “Long ago before the time of man when cities were begun and future dreams and all the world was one unbroken ice, there came down from north a mighty glacier. As if unseen power it moved and left the land a gleaming plain of ice. Ah yes, but when that glacier moved away it left a land enchanted for all time and in that land came a race of men who lived among the trees and woods and left that land a wondrous place.” Something like that, that’s how it starts. I can’t remember the rest of it now but the whole idea was that the Indians lived there before us and left it for us. Now it is for us to enjoy this land. And I think probably something said to leave it that way. There is probably a copy of that somewhere in the Girl Scout files. I don’t know.

KG – I’ll have to see if I can find a whole copy. That sounds really interesting. Well, I think I made it through all of my questions here. Is there anything else that I missed that you wanted to talk about?

EH – I don’t think so. I mean it was just a great place to be. The fact that we were so close to nature, many of us living out there just at the edge of the lake. The lake was pretty much of a quiet place in those days. As I say we never got into town. Then going even further to places like Follensby Clear Pond and coming up through the Fulton Chain to Clear Lake and Raquette Lake and so forth – just wonderful. Let me see. I remember one trip that we took and went from Middle Saranac and there was a little - what do you call it – the lock between Middle and Upper Saranac and then you get through that lock and there were blackberries, tremendous blackberries which we ate. It’s things like that that I remember about the place. Well, I guess one thing I should say if it hasn’t been apparent is the girls did it themselves. You had a feeling of confidence that you could do these things yourself. You didn’t need a man around to do it. You didn’t need boys around to do it. We did have a handyman on the island for some of the heavy stuff but fundamentally we were on our own. We were learning how to do things like portaging these canoes and paddling long distances. It’s a sort of thing a teenage girl can do and develop a sense of capability and self-confidence and belief in one’s abilities. I think that perhaps is something that well a lot girls never get that I think. I went on to ultimately going to graduate school, ultimately joining Bell Laboratory. I have a significant patent so you know the fact that I never doubted I could do things and do things in a male world afterwards. Because

Bell Laboratory was a very male world. I think I acquired it partly there and partly from the fact that my parents never told me that you know you're a girl and you can't do this. But you really did develop a capability that way at that camp.

KG – That's a very eloquent way to express what it meant to you. It's really something. I really enjoyed doing... I interviewed one other person about the Girl Scout camp and I have two more names on my list and I've really enjoyed these interviews. They seem really special and I'm so happy that you are willing to share these memories of a place that meant a lot to you and really affected people's lives. I'm very happy we can get this on the recording.

EH – Yes, I think it's important for people to know that Saranac did that for us. Who are the girls that you interviewed already?

KG – I interviewed Chris Hildebrand and on my list I have a Jane Claffy (sp) and Emma Harkmeyer (sp).

EH – Ok I don't know those folks. I think they maybe came along after us.

KG – I don't have too much information on Emma but they were people Paula directed me to. It's just... I think it's a really special place, the Girl Scout camp. I actually grew up right across from it and I'm glad that I'm able to dig into the history a little bit more and kind of share what a special place it is with other people who might not know all of the history and what an impact it had.

EH – Yes, I think it's a very good idea. I think that the Girl Scouts in general – part of what they did was to develop confidence in girls, a feeling of self-confidence and so forth. If you have to... if you are someone.... I don't know how many miles it is from Eighth Lake up to camp (it took several days to get back) but if you are that far away from home and you don't have a cellphone to call in case of trouble and you're kind of on your own, it does do what I am saying – give you self-confidence.

KG – Well I'm going to turn off the recording.

END