

Project: YWCA Centennial: *100 Years of Challenge and Change: Whatcom Women and the YWCA*

Interviewee: The late Geneil Wasel Chevalier [dies December 31, 2008 at 84]

Interviewer: Dr. Lynne Masland, YWCA Centennial history chair

Date: May 14, 2007

Place: Geneil's home

Transcriber: Judy McNickle

Edited Online version – CPNWS.

Lynne: *Here, before we talk more, let me turn on the tape recorder.*

Geneil: I'm Geneil Chevalier. This is my son Chuck.

I started to tell about my mother-in-law, Hulda Manson who cooked at the Y. She married Jim Chevalier [superintendent of the Pacific American Fisheries shipyard]. She had just moved into Bellingham from out in the Deming area. Her parents built a home at corner of 6th and Cowgill on the South Side. Right across the street was a woman her age named Gertrude Pearson who was the head cook at the YWCA. She asked Hulda if she would cook with her. Gertrude Pearson married Hulda's brother, Nick Manson, and lived in the house on corner of 6th and Cowgill Avenue. I remember Mother talking about Mrs. [Frances] Larrabee [founding YWCA board member]. She and Mrs. Larrabee were friends because Cowgill is right at the base of Edgemoor and at the time there were only two houses in Edgemoor, the Larrabee home, now Lairmont Manor, and the son's home, which was across the street and is still up there. That is all that was up there. That was the playground of my husband and his family when he grew up because there weren't houses there at all. Mother Chevalier went with Gertrude as the assistant cook.

They [the Larrabees] were a very giving family. I just know that she [Hulda] cooked there [the Y]. And I somehow am assuming it was dinner. But yet at that time there weren't cars so how she got there or back I have no idea, but she did cook the meals. My assumption was always that it was that one [the Y] on Forest Street, since it was new then, and it seems likely that Gertrude would have been looking for someone to be her assistant there. It wasn't very long that they served meals and that is where she was. This is a picture of Mother Chevalier...right at that time...this is her wedding picture – Dec. 25, 1915 – that is what she wore and this is Jim Chevalier. These [another photograph?] happen to be my parents and I had this (picture) at one time over my bed.

It was interesting because I had a couple of other ones, but this is the better of the two wedding ones. I could loan it to you if you wanted to borrow and make copies...She [Hulda] was about 5'10" and we always said of her that she walked like a ship at full sail. There was just an air about her. She lived until she was 95 years old...and she still walked that way when she was 95. She just had a grace about her. She really did. This is one of her when she was a little younger...but the wedding picture is the valid one.... I do not believe she graduated from high school. I really don't believe she did.

I will call Gertrude's daughter Shirley in Seattle. I called her once to see if she had any pictures of when she worked in Seattle. Shirley said, „Oh, heavens, no.“ I do know when she cooked she was Hulda Manson and she married a Chevalier. Simply because of the time, it's hard for me to believe that she did it after she married; everything would suggest that would not have happened.

Tell me something about your life.

I'm 84 years old. I grew up in Bellingham...came here when I was 2 1/2. I remember the Y as it was...or is. But my memory of it begins when I was in probably in the 7th or 8th grade and we used to have what we called splash parties at the Y. And what I remember is that in those days travel was so different. I lived over on Young or Walnut Street at that time, then Grant, and I'm sure we gathered some place and walked to the Y. In those days the only place you could get something like a hamburger was a Triple XXX Barrel on DuPont Street and on State Street there was Lubey's. You could pay 5 cents for a hamburger. Hamburgers were scarcely known of; certainly there wasn't pizza and all of that. I would have been 13 or so – 1935 to 1940. I graduated in 1940. In my high school days we might have done a splash party but I feel we did that when we were younger. But life was so different and there were so few things to participate in and so we did have these splash parties.

Interestingly, in the 1950s I happened to be a part of a group of 12 gals who started in 1948. Our husbands had mostly been overseas, and after they came home, we adopted a German family and made clothes for the children. My home was the place they came because I had a sewing machine. We met on Wednesday nights. We did it for 4 weeks and made all the clothes, and decided it was fun so kept doing it for 50 years on Wednesday nights. I think it was (during) the 1950s, but maybe the 1960s.

One of my friends from splash parties would go to the bottom of the pool and hang on to the ladder and bubbles would just come up and up. Then staying all night with her, the bubbles would still come. (We) just did amazing things. My other experience (with the Y) was (with) Chuck[edited].. When he was 18 months old, I was an avid *Ladies Home Journal* reader. (I read that) they were beginning to feel that swimming for small children was a good thing. Mrs. [Jessie] Carver [Y swimming instructor for many years] joined me to see what might happen [if Chuck went swimming at the Y]. However there was something about just walking into that room with all that blue water – he was just petrified, so it never developed. When he did learn to swim it was at the YMCA years later. But that first effort was with Mrs. Carver, but that didn't work out so well. Did we try it more than once? I don't believe we did. The thing I remember about Chuck going swimming was that the dressing room was always the coldest place that ever was created. It was always windy in there and you never wanted to stay very long, and it always seemed to have a wet floor. It was not a wonderful place to go.

What kind of role did the Y play in the community?

The Y had Girls Reserves for high school. I did belong for a while. It was not a big thing in my life. I know we went up there and I know we ate. I hardly remember what else we did. Someone who might have been in at the same time was Margaret Haggard Miller, who was a [high school]

senior when she came to Bellingham. I can't think of anybody else, but I was a Girl Reserve for a while. It was a very simple program. The Girl Reserves did have a Christmas Tolo [girl-ask-boy dance]. And I think I have my dance program from one of those. [Reading from back of photo:] „Girl Reserves...Friday, Nov. 26, 1937 at the Leopold (Hotel) in the Crystal Ballroom beneath the twirling light in the center.“ If you would like these (programs) to show sometime....

That would be nice. We will do a photo exhibition from November to March. We're trying to collect pieces of memorabilia)

Jean Lynch, she's still living, she was to go with Eugene Moore to this dance and at the last minute she became ill and so I went in her place. That's very interesting...dance cards...we always had them...we would get it set up ahead of time – who we were going to dance with, each one. Here you can see: The first one is Eugene, Eugene, then Bill Hunt, whose father was a dentist here. He runs a travel agency in Seattle and lives on Hunts Point down there. We used to really dance. We just twirled and twirled and twirled, and the ball would be twirling around. [She mentions a number of names, including]...Frances Loby was there, went with Frank Troutle...Oliver Kemp...Jack Norton...Stanley White with Elizabeth Manson...Arthur...that would have been Art. And here are the patrons and patronesses: Dr. and Mrs. Jay Lawson, Mr. and Mrs. H. Gleason, and Mr. and Mrs. Percy White...Swanstroms...Irish...I think he was a principal...Benedicts...Cramer ...Powell, principal of Bellingham High School...Miss Jean Rousseau...Miss Katherine Crusar, Miss Helensome others....they were probably teachers I don't know. I don't remember...

Lynne --- Would you like to keep them and then we'll borrow the program later?

When I think of the Y and the things I was involved in at the Y...I know I frequently went to the Red Stocking Tea at Christmas Time. Another thing: I was the secretary of the Bellingham Council of Churches for a number of years and we met at the Y and we were...When you come in front door, you turn to the left, there's a lounge [now offices]. That is where we met once a month on a Friday. That was about (the) 1950s.

Then in 1953 I was pregnant and they had just begun a club for young mothers who were pregnant, and we met probably in the lounge until our babies came. [Chuck was born in 1953.] (It was) a good service. Red Stocking Teas [at Christmas]. Mrs. [Kitty] Stimson was involved in that...just don't know the other women involved. (I) probably attended in the 1960s; I went to work in 1971. I certainly wouldn't have gone after that.

Let's see. What else? (I've) always been aware [of Y activities]. There was a young woman who came from Africa and went to Western, (and) there was a woman whose husband was minister of the Congregational church – she lives on the corner of Cornwall and Broadway. She became close to her [the African visitor] who happened to go to the Garden Street United Methodist Church. We all got to know her very well. It was a fascinating story. She came over here to go to school – came over here from Rhodesia [Zimbabwe]. She had a boyfriend over there so we got to hear about this love affair across the ocean. Eventually they were married by proxy, then she went back, I think, to be married. When they were married we were just amazed because one

of their gifts was the six-year-old son of one of her cousins – in that culture the greatest gift you could give was what was most important to you.

Carol Henshaw visited her there. The African visitor lived at the Y, approximately in the 1960s or 70s. Couple, three summers ago, her daughter came to visit and stayed with [the church lady] when she was here. Before the daughter went home, we bought her a negligee – the fellowship group I was in at the church – and the party was at my house. It was for Christmas, and she was going to be going back. She opened this negligee – it was just gorgeous, (a) cream colored nightie (that) was way too big for her. I wanted to take it back, but she would not let me take it back because she liked it so well. She told us that when she wore it, her husband looked at her and said, „what’s that for?“ Anyway, Carol Henshaw did visit with her in her home [in Africa] where at one time she was secretary to the Bishop of Zimbabwe. I don’t remember when it was...1960s or 1970s...“cause I was still in my fellowship group after I went to work in 1971. I’ll have to find that out. She lived at the Y and when she became associated with our church, we discovered she hardly had enough to eat so we started helping with that. (Her) name eludes me but I can get it all.

When you were growing up, what role did the Y play in the community?

It went through a time when it lagged. I went to work in 1971 for Bellingham Police Department and worked there for 16 years. That was when (the Y) went through a real rough time trying to get adjusted to a new age. Sybil Tucker Read was the head at the time, and they were trying to determine how does the Y meet the needs of the women in this time because it is so different? They were just finding their way because life had changed – living had changed. It was the Hippie generation and all of that. Sybil was a member of our church and so I was very aware that during that time the Y struggled. I was administrative secretary to Bellingham Police Chief [Terry] Mangan [1976-87]. I was very aware of rape and that sort of stuff and other things that were becoming a reality that never even been heard of before – because our world had changed. I had not become aware of (them) before.

Many interesting programs were born at the Y out of these new times.

I can’t say I was ever really active at the Y, only a member when I was in Girl Reserves. I went to work in 1971 because of my husband’s ill health. From then on I was not connected with it in any way because of my work.

Were we not aware because people didn’t talk about it?

I was aware of it in the sense of however it fit in with [the] police department because things were happening that had never happened before. I often use the example that many of the things that are on the police blotter now just were never there. I use as my example in my life when I was a little girl about six years old, a neighbor boy had taken my brother’s scooter, and I was determined to get it back. I marched down the street behind him and he wouldn’t give it to me. In the backyard he had a white Spitz dog and he just said „sic “em“ and the dog came and bit me in the back. And looking back, I don’t even remember my mother talking to them. Now, it would have been a big thing. The kid would have been in (for) counseling and the dog tested. It would

be handled differently – it was so different – things happened, but they were treated differently. Having worked at police department ... They always say that more children are molested at home by relatives than what we read in the paper. I am convinced, as I look back, that I probably knew of some – I'm quite sure that the mothers probably knew about it – but we just didn't talk about it because the world was different. You just did not talk about it....

There would have been fewer options then.

Yes, there just were so few options – family would be disgraced – just completely different.

What was your maiden name....and where did you live when you were growing up?

Maiden name was Wasel. When growing up, I lived at 1800 Lakeway Drive right on corner of St. Paul until I was 8. I lived in several places in the county. When I was in the 6th grade – this was in the Depression – we moved from one, because my father had always done farming.

(Transcriber's Note: The rest of this tape is missing, covered up by the sounds of my typing because I hit the record button. I'm so sorry.)

Side B

(Transcriber's Note: The beginning of this tape, describing her visit to a class at Western, is missing. From Lynne's notes, I see she talked more about where she lived and going to the library, and the public market, then about local industries, including PAF, the largest fish cannery in the world, a small pulp mill, and Bloedel Donovan, which employed 3,000 men work during the 1940s. Then the company left down and the men didn't have work.....The tape then picks up as follows, talking about her presentation to the Western class.)

There was an „upper 400“ in Bellingham who really ruled the city. Ford Motor Company had wanted to come into Bellingham with a parts thing of some kind and they paid \$5 an hour, and they were kept from coming to Bellingham because the others did not want to pay that kind of wage. Ford was never a union company. It just paid that kind of money. And, so, living in this atmosphere, I was very much aware of the beginning of unions. And nowadays, they do not hold much worth in the community by most people. In that day people worked 6 days a week. My father, who was in construction, sometimes would work 24 hours in a day when there was a (concrete) pour or something that they had to do. I watched the unions become very strong and you knew why? Many men lost their jobs because it was very dangerous to be part of a group that was developing the unions in the city [Bellingham].

Then in about 19-(something) – whenever Mobil (Oil) came –.that was when it began to change because then Mobil came and then (Alcoa) Aluminum and so on. Bellingham was just in a deep funk for a number of years because of what happened with 3,000 men [from the cannery] on the street with no jobs. So I talked about that but I told them [the students] the thing I was most conscious of was the difference in (the value of) money.

The home I built here next door 57 years ago. I have a list of what it cost us to build that house. For instance, surveying, I think it was, came to \$25. Now it would be \$2,000. All of the electrical work, everything – not the fixtures but all the wiring and everything – came to \$264. You wouldn't even get „em in the door now for that. Just think, item after item. And it's just unreal the difference in what something costs. So I did talk [to the students] about the industries and this sort of thing.

You know what it costs now to have a wedding? I was married Oct. 4, 1942. My husband had gone to Alaska for the summer. And before he went, we had a decision to make in those days: Do we marry before he goes, or do we wait until he comes back because we knew he was going to the Army on the draft the minute he got back from Alaska. After he had been gone two weeks in the spring, I thought we'd get married when fall comes. In case we didn't, I ordered a grey wool coat with a grey wool collar on it. I worked in Seattle at the time, and I thought he could come to Seattle for the weekend before he goes and we could have a special weekend. Well, he arrived home on Sept. the 18th. He came to Seattle to see me, and we decided we were going to get married. On that Friday I came home to Bellingham on the bus. You didn't whip back and forth in cars then. He met me at the bus depot, and I received this diamond by the (??) Motor Company (??) and that was on Friday. Saturday, Mother and I went to town and bought material for my dress, my going-away dress and material for my three attendants' dresses and ordered the invitations on that day. On the following Tuesday, the invitations arrived. I addressed them and they were out and we were married on Oct. 4. One woman made my wedding dress. She made my going-away dress. The girls [attendants] took care of theirs. The total cost was about \$125. One of the girls told Dr. Curley afterwards, "I'm getting married in August and I'm going to quit worrying." I had a very lovely wedding. But the cost of things (today)...

Medically, in 1951 I had cardio-vascular surgery – the first person to ever have what I had. And everything – the doctors, hospitals, everything – was \$1,500. Now it would be over \$100,000. It's money. The other thing I asked the kids was how many of you don't have cell phones. There was only one. I said I worry about you. How are you ever going to learn to make a decision on your own? I said I really do. I worry because you have someone to call all the time that can do something about what's happening to you.

Of course it [talking to students] was a wonderful experience. The next week I received this card through the mail. There were 21 students in the class, about a third of them boys. Everyone in the class had written a note. I asked [the teacher] David whose idea was this. He said it was theirs. They arrived on Monday with a card because they were just overwhelmed by the difference in what life was like back then. It was fascinating. It really was.

I worked at Western for 21 years...Director of Communications.

I was Miss (Leona) Sundquist's secretary [Marine Science Professor]. I went to work for her back in 1957 to put my son through nursery school. In those days there were only 2 nursery schools in Bellingham. Chuck was an only child. Since he didn't have brothers and sisters to learn from, he needed to go to nursery school and I went to work for Miss Sundquist. When he

started kindergarten and was on his way, I quit but kept working in registration. He (name?) asked me if I would be interested in applying for the job and I wasn't, but I did registration with Marguerite Goltz for a number of years. Marguerite and I, we used to have more fun together.

I am going to show you pictures of the wedding.