



73½ South Professor Street
P.O. Box 455
Oberlin, OH 44074-0455
Phone: 440-774-1700
Fax: 440-774-8061
Website: www.oberlinheritagecenter.org
E-mail: members@oberlinheritage.org

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Review Copy and/or Photos available upon request

Contact:

Pat Murphy, Executive Director
patm@oberlinheritage.org
440-774-1700

Eugenia Poporad Vanek, Editor/Compiler
vanekep@verizon.net
727-867-8687 or 440-823-0048

New Book features 20th Century Oberlin Women's Stories

The Oberlin Heritage Center announces the publication of *Bonnets to Boardrooms: Women's Stories from a Historic College Town*. Compiled and edited by Eugenia Poporad Vanek, the book features the recollections of fifty-two women about changing economic and social conditions, experiences, and opportunities that altered women's roles within the family, the community, and society during the 20th century. The stories that are included were among many collected by Oberlin Oral History Project volunteers over the course of the past three decades. Tracy Chevalier, author of *The Last Runaway*, calls the book "a treasure trove of strong voices and intriguing details."

Even though Oberlin, Ohio provides the backdrop for these stories, they could have originated in any small town. Many of the themes and topics in the stories will sound familiar to anyone who grew up in the 20th century. Seven chapters, each spanning multiple decades, focus on: growing up in the 1920s; changing attitudes toward marriage, career, and family life; changing economic conditions in the 1930s; the struggle for racial equality in the 1940s and 1950s; the peace and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s; and women's efforts to create a better community in the latter part of the century.

Some vignettes showcase national figures in the news. For example, Jeanne Pease described campaigning for Congressman Donald Pease (D-Ohio, 1977-1993), while juggling the demands of motherhood. Patricia Stetson remembered her Girl Scout Troop welcoming First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to Oberlin in 1942.

Others share seemingly everyday occurrences that give vibrancy to life and a small town. One of these was Mildred Chapin, who shared her excitement about learning to drive in the 1920s: "I learned to drive a car when I was thirteen with my mother at my side. I don't remember what car I learned on, but I do remember that we got different cars frequently. They were always

gotten with trading as little money as was necessary. We never had a new one that I can recall. One day I was driving the Essex home. I was at the top of a hill when I realized there was a wheel ahead of me going down the road. It beat me to the bottom, that's for sure. I had to get off the road, stop the wheel, go to a farmhouse, and call for help. I always referred to that car as Napoleon Fall--a--Part."

Another was Oberlin's first African American teacher, Elizabeth Thomas, who grew up in Oberlin: "I think that I was in the fourth or fifth grade before I even realized I was black. I had a friend who came to see me. I was taking a bath and she came into the bathroom. She was white, and she asked me if I was colored. I hadn't even thought of it before, and I had to stop and think. Because my mother was light and my father was brown skinned, I said, 'Well, I guess I am half and half.' And she said, 'I thought one side of your body looked a little darker.' From then on, I kept looking to see which side I thought was darker. That was the first time I became aware of being different from anybody else."

Reviewing and organizing the interviews became a labor of love for Dr. Vanek. It took over five years of researching, writing, and organizing the text and photographs to produce the publication. The amply illustrated book includes biographies and photos of the women as well as an index. In compiling it, Vanek, an educator, relied heavily on the historical resources of the Oberlin Heritage Center. She was assisted in the endeavor by volunteers Charles Dial, Sarah MacLennan Kerr, Marlene D. Merrill and many others.

Bonnets to Boardrooms: Women's Stories from a Historic College Town is available for purchase (\$19.95) through the Heritage Center's website (www.oberlinheritagecenter.org) as well as at the OHC Museum Store (73½ South Professor Street), Ben Franklin/Mindfair Books (13 West College Street), FAVA's Uncommon Objects (39 South Main Street), and Kendal at Oberlin's Cardinal Shop (600 Kendal Drive). Proceeds support the mission of the non-profit Oberlin Heritage Center: *to preserve and share Oberlin's unique heritage and make the community a better place to live, learn, work and visit.*

The Heritage Center's Oral History Project is an important collection of interviews that continues to grow with a dedicated, volunteer group of interviewers and transcribers. For more information about the book and the Center's programs featuring Oberlin history, the Underground Railroad, women's rights, historic preservation and more, please visit www.oberlinheritagecenter.org.

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