

**Mildred Heifort**  
**Narrator**

**June Dobervich**  
**Interviewer**

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**JD:** This is June Dobervich, representing the Heritage Education Commission for their Oral History Project. I'm interviewing Mildred Heifort, a multitalented lady who has promised to share with us her memories from a lifetime of involvement with the art of needlework in many mediums.

Mildred, what are your roots? Could your ancestry have been an influence in your many artistic pursuits?

**MH:** Oh, indeed they were. My mother, of course, was the first one. Well, she was a very good sewer, and she sewed for her family...large family, and for the girls and even for the main...the boys would get their shirts and nightshirts, and the men their big plaid nightshirts. And then another one who was of great influence was my Aunt Laura. She was not my aunt; she was my mother's aunt. But to all of us, she was Aunt Laura.

**JD:** Well, hmmm, who taught you to crochet?

**MH:** Well, that's a kind of a strange story. I spent a lot of time with Aunt Laura. She took me home with her whenever she could. And I stayed with her from the third, fourth, and fifth grades. Well, Aunt Laura had quite a large house, and she had two extra bedrooms that she used to rent for sleeping rooms. And one was occupied by a lady who was the telephone operator. And she...well, she was a very pretty woman. She had dark hair and she kind of...increased her healthy look, which...with a little tint on her cheeks.

**JD:** [Chuckles]

**MH:** I didn't know about that at that time. I knew about the face powder because my sisters and my aunts used that. When she used to invite me into her room...and one time she was tinting her cheeks, and I think she probably noticed my interest or maybe I even asked her. But she asked me not to tell anybody about that.

**JD:** [Laughs]

**MH:** [Chuckles] And later she gave me a boy doll named Cuddles that I was very fond of. I think she was bribing me a little.

**JD:** Mmmm.

**MH:** But she knew what she was doing when she sat and crocheted pretty crocheted collars for her dark dresses. You know, they made a frame around her face that...that really would...made her look very healthy and beautiful and I'm sure her suitors noted that.

**JD:** And she taught you to...?

**MH:** Well, Aunt Laura got a bone crochet hook and some red yarn, and she taught me the crochet stitches. And I crocheted them over and over. I didn't make anything. But I rattled that yarn, and I crocheted it again and again, and that's where I learned to crochet.

**JD:** Well, the crocheting came first and then I suppose everybody learns to knit...after that.

**MH:** Well, knitting came...I was a little bit older then.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And World War I, all of the magazines had directions for Red Cross knitting. And the Red Cross wanted to furnish socks for the soldiers that were knot-free, that wouldn't blister their feet. They also knitted sweaters, and helmets, and washcloths. But I knitted one washcloth and that was tedious. But I took these magazines that had the directions and the [unclear].

**JD:** You mean they were sort of specifications, Mildred, as to how you had to knit these things? Certain rules or specifications?

**MH:** Well, yes, they only accepted socks that had a certain kind of a toe and heel knitted, and it was called a Kitchener heel and toe. Well, the yarn was distributed by the government through the Red Cross chapters. And my older sister was the chairman of that knitting project in the county in which she was teaching. Well, there were many older women who were wonderful, fine knitters, but they didn't have that particular knowledge of knitting the Kitchener heel and toe. So hmmm...[Laughs] My sister made the mistake of taking her little sister to teach these older ladies!

**JD:** And how'd that go over? [Laughs]

**MH:** [Laughing] And they...they weren't all too happy about having a child teach them!

**JD:** [Laughs]

**MH:** But you know, patriotism was so high in those days, they wouldn't think of not making the right toe for the government. So they...they accepted it.

**JD:** Could I ask you how old you were at that time when you were knitting for the Red Cross?

**MH:** I was about twelve.

**JD:** Twelve, yes.

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** Well, had you already been sewing your own clothes then, Mildred?

**MH:** Oh...yes. I had made one dress.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** [Laughing] That was kind of a strange experience!

**JD:** Sounds like it...there's a story behind this. Go ahead and tell us.

**MH:** [Giggles] Well, I was begging my mother to let me make a dress. And materials were a little bit expensive, so she produced a piece of red calico that was kind of out of date. And you know patterns didn't have directions like they have now.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But she gave me the material, and the pattern, and the pins, and she told me to...stretch that material out on the dining room table and to pin every piece before I used the scissors. Well, when I thought I had it all pinned, I couldn't find her, she had gone to the neighbors. So I couldn't wait; I got the scissors out and away I went.

**JD:** Mmmm-mmmm.

**MH:** Well, when I got it all cut, here I found I hadn't included the pattern for the collar. Well, and it was unthinkable to have a dress without a collar in those days. So I went through everything and finally I found a piece and I cut the collar. Well, I went to checking...I had used a piece that had been cut for the back of the blouse!

**JD:** What did you do about that? [Laughs]

**MH:** [Chuckles] Well, I just was sick. [Laughs] And my mother kind of chuckled. She didn't take it too seriously. But it...we put it away. But I was just simply brokenhearted to think I couldn't get at that dress and stitch it up. But then, oh, dear old Aunt Laura saved the day. She had some of the same material that she was using for a quilt. So my dress was finished. And I enjoyed wearing that dress because I had made it myself!

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Well, that was the first, I'm sure, of many. And hmmm, as you grew a little older then, you sewed for yourself. Did you sew for others?

**MH:** Oh, and during high school I sewed for my schoolmates. And then after that I sewed for most anybody, everybody.

**JD:** I suppose then from that kind of practice you learned some skills that led to perhaps something that paid, alterations or...?

**MH:** Well, yes. I just...ah...and just naturally, I took anything that...was in the sewing line.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And I had plenty of business, I can tell you.

**JD:** Well...

**MH:** You didn't get paid awfully well.

**JD:** No.

**MH:** But you know, living wasn't expensive then either, so...

**JD:** Well, did you get paid for any of that early work?

**MH:** Well, I did for my first piece of crocheting.

**JD:** Hmmm.

**MH:** I was in...I think I was twelve then, too. And we had a neighbor who had a *great* love for beauty. She loved laces and pretty things in her home, and she had very little. But she had a big folding bed in her home that she wanted a scarf to put over the top. A folding bed is a piece of furniture that looks something like these antique wardrobes that we are busy collecting now.

**JD:** Do we call it a murphy bed or is that not...?

**MH:** No.

**JD:** No, not quite.

**MH:** No, a murphy...

**JD:** That went inside a closet, didn't it?

**MH:** Yes, or a recess in the wall.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** This went in...this bed went into the cabinet. But it wasn't as high as a wardrobe, so if you put a scarf over the top the lace would be exposed.

**JD:** I see.

**MH:** So she came with a box of crochet [unclear] and begged me to crochet some medallions to edge a scarf, which I did.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** Well, my mother sewed the medallions on the Belgian linen, and the lady was *so* happy, and she put two silver dollars in my hands.

**JD:** Mmmm.

**MH:** Well, I refused because I didn't think anybody should be paid for doing something they enjoyed as much as I had. But she persisted, and I had to keep the two silver dollars.

**JD:** Well, that leads me to another question. Hmmm. I don't suppose anyone ever gets paid, like you say, the amount that they should have for the time that you put in on this kind of thing. But are there other compensations that you get for this creative art that you do?

**MH:** Oh, yes. [Chuckles] I get so many letters, and cards, and notes, and telephone calls even, and of course personal contacts where they just love and appreciate the things I do.

**JD:** Everything that you do.

**MH:** And I have made so many friends. My needlework has opened doors for me that I don't know...hmmm...anything else I could have done would do.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Well, I first met you when...by word-of-mouth advertising when someone told me how wonderful you were. Hmmm. You created some very special window treatments in my very first home. Hmmm, how did your years in the draperies and slipcovers and decorating, how did they begin, Mildred?

**MH:** [Chuckles] Well, they came out of a clear sky. I didn't...I had never enjoyed taking care of my own window problems and never thought of going into it. But one day when my second child had started school—the first one had started the year before—it was a rainy Friday. And my telephone rang about ten o'clock in the morning. And it was a call from the manager of a drapery department in a furniture store. And their drapery seamstress had asked for time off because of a terminally ill husband. So the girl in the office who had recommended me had called me, and then she turned me over to this department manager. And I explained that I knew nothing about

it. Well, she said she would train me, and asked me to come down. I went down in the pouring rain with a borrowed umbrella.

**JD:** Something like today! [Laughs]

**MH:** [Laughs] Yeah. And [sighs] then she convinced me to try it. So I went home and fixed lunch for my children, and went back to work at one o'clock. My husband had early hours, so he was home when the children came from school.

**JD:** Well, how long did you work there?

**MH:** Oh, a little over a year. And then I decided that the children...my children needed their mother. They weren't happy about coming home from school and no mother there.

**JD:** That's the way your family reacted to your working, hmmm?

**MH:** Yes, that's right. [Chuckles]

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. You established a wonderful reputation, Mildred, in a very short time of public working, that is, connected to this furniture store. Hmmm...to what do you attribute your success in decorating? I mean, you know, you worked there a year and a half, and then all of a sudden you were just really in demand. You were a one-man business at that point.

**MH:** That's right.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** I don't know. I don't understand that, because I hadn't done any other decorating work any other place. I had done a little sewing at home when it was called for...oh...during the time I was working there. But as far as that...draperies and slipcovers, I don't know how it got out, but...

**JD:** Well, you...you...

**MH:** On Monday...

**JD:** You worked for a lot of people in a year and half.

**MH:** Oh, yes.

**JD:** Obviously, everybody you worked for was highly satisfied.

**MH:** Oh, yes, and they knew who had done it, the actual sewing.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But by Monday my telephone was ringing. And...and it...at that time, most everybody worked for WPA [Works Progress Administration] wages, so while I worked downtown I did a little better than that. I got fifty cents an hour. [Chuckles]

**JD:** Well...

**MH:** And...but I decided I was going to stay home with the children. And the first week I was home I had tripled the income of the weeks that I had worked downtown.

**JD:** And so then how...how many years...? Hmm...I guess no one that is listening would possibly know how many years you've lived in total. And I don't know whether you have any objection to telling us, but it might help to put some of these things in perspective, if you wouldn't mind.

**MH:** And how many years...?

**JD:** How many years old you are? [Chuckles]

**MH:** Oh...[Chuckles]

**JD:** Or would you rather not say?

**MH:** [Laughs] Well, I'm not at all ashamed of it!

**JD:** Okay.

**MH:** I'm just sort of proud of myself that I made it this far.

**JD:** Ah...

**MH:** I'm now eighty-three years old.

**JD:** Yes, okay. And you tell me that when you first started working out in the public at this store you were...hmmm...let's say how old...thirty, thirty-five? Ah...

**MH:** Oh, something like that. Well, I maybe can straighten it out this way. My daughter and son were in the first and second grade, and I was still at it when they were in college, and even when my son was working on his Master's.

**JD:** Okay. So what, about...?

**MH:** That's...that's about the time I quit.

**JD:** Twenty...twenty years, twenty-five?

**MH:** Oh, I was...let's...yeah. I was thirty-six years old.

**JD:** Okay.

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** Alright. So then you would say that you kind of worked out and more or less for the public doing these kinds of things like slipcovering, drapering...well, any kind of sewing project that they had in mind.

**MH:** Oh, lampshades by the carload.

**JD:** Lampshades, ah!

**MH:** [Chuckles]

**JD:** For about what? Twenty...twenty-five years, maybe?

**MH:** Yeah, I think so.

**JD:** Yeah.

**MH:** Something like that.

**JD:** So did there come a time when you decided, mmmm, I'd rather not do all these big things. I think I'd kind of like to stay home and sort of...sort of retire a little bit? I mean, you've *never* retired. You're not retired today, but...

**MH:** I'm just tired! [Laughs]

**JD:** [Laughs] Well, did there come a time like that, Mildred?

**MH:** Oh, yes, when it came time for my husband to think about retiring, then I started sorting things out, and trying to find out what I would...really wanted to do and what I didn't.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. What...? You know, during that time that you were taking on these big assignments, what do you think was the greatest challenge you were ever presented with in someone asking you to do something?

**MH:** Well, probably when I worked with this stage curtain for the auditorium at Maple State College.

**JD:** Oh, my word!

**MH:** And that was heavy, heavy material and very large.



**JD:** Could you do that on a regular machine?

**MH:** Yes. And that...as far as that goes, the machines at that time would...a regular machine would handle it.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But hmmm...I...the...the weight, I couldn't handle.

**JD:** Oh...oh...okay.

**MH:** The material's so...I had to have two assistants.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** A young man and a young lady that...on each...one on each side of the machine that lifted the material along as we stitched it.

**JD:** Well, did you consider that your most difficult job then, too? Or were there some other jobs that were...would classify as difficult?

**MH:** No, it wasn't a...it wasn't difficult as far as knowing what I was doing. It was the weight there that made it difficult.

**JD:** Yes.

**MH:** [Laughing] Well now, some of my most difficult jobs were some of these...a few of these fussy women that really didn't know what they wanted!

**JD:** [Laughs] Well, one day when we were talking you were talking about sails for a sailboat. What was that story?

**MH:** Oh, that was during the war. And this young man had gotten a sailboat from his grandfather. But he had everything but the sail. He couldn't buy a sail at that time. And I don't know where he got the canvas to make it, but he begged me with tears in his eyes to help him. Well, we...he brought some books, and some measurements, and some directions. And I didn't have a table big enough, so we staked it out in my backyard. [Laughs] I'll have to admit, I felt kind of silly crawling around in my backyard with my mouth full of pins and this nice young man!

**JD:** [Laughs]

**MH:** But the sail was a success and he had a great time with it. [Laughs]

**JD:** Oh, was there any one job, Mildred, that provided you with perhaps more pleasure and satisfaction than the rest at this time of your life? Or were there so many that...?

**MH:** Ah, there were so many.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And some of them were *big*. A new house would require everything from top to bottom.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And that was always a big job and a pleasure.

**JD:** Was your work mostly here in Fargo or did you ever travel outside of Fargo to...?

**MH:** Oh, I went to...hmmm...several towns in North Dakota. I'd go and stay for a week and...and a few in Minnesota. About the farthest I went was Eau Claire, Wisconsin one winter, and I spent two weeks there.

**JD:** Mmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. Well, we somehow in our talk now have seemed to have arrived at about the midpoint of your life. And yet what you've done since then seems like almost another complete lifetime, just staggering. Hmmm. Ah, perhaps we could get into some of the kinds of different sorts of mediums that you have worked in. I know you've made some *beautiful* rugs and wall hangings. How did all...all that begin?

**MH:** Well, I made hooked rug when I was about ten years old, a small one. It was not very pretty, but I did it, and I was very proud of it. And there again my dear Aunt Laura comes into the picture. She was an artist at rugs and quilts. And I can remember sitting on the porch one summer evening, and I was coloring a Sears Roebuck catalog. She took my crayons and she copied the colors of the sunset. And later that winter a crocheted rug appeared in one of the bedrooms and it had those colors. She was very sensitive to color.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** I think that came from her ancestry. My great grandparents came from that part of Norway where the...where rosemaling was...

**JD:** Originated?

**MH:** Originated.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And it seems all of those people had a sense of color.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And a love of beauty. And in fact, she was born on the Atlantic Ocean.

**JD:** [Chuckles] Oh!

**MH:** When the family were coming, it was in 1850. They were...it was a very rough summer on the Atlantic. They had two tremendous storms. Many, many ships and boats were lost. But they made it through that part. And the worst part was that between these storms the wind completely died and they were becalmed, and they floated around out in that ocean for, oh, approximately three weeks, not knowing whether they would ever see land. And during those days, Aunt Laura was born.

**JD:** My goodness.

**MH:** But they made it, and they made it to land. And then got to New York, and then they came out to Iowa.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And then from Iowa they came to Dakota Territory in 1880. And the...Aunt Laura's sister, Aunt Bertha, she didn't marry. She lived up in the northwestern part of North Dakota, and she would come down for Christmas and then stay 'til spring. And then they would make quilts.

**JD:** Ah...

**MH:** Oh, they would make quilts and rugs, and they would have quilting parties. And they were a pair, because during the time they'd be together, they'd have quilting parties in the afternoon. And in the evenings they would just have parties and Aunt Bertha told fortunes.

**JD:** Mmmm.

**MH:** And if they didn't have a gay time in the winter!

**JD:** [Chuckles] Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And then before she went back, they'd come out to the farm and they'd make quilts for my mother.

**JD:** Well, how about you? Did you make quilts? Have you made quilts?

**MH:** Oh yes, I've made a lot of quilts. [Laughs]

**JD:** [Laughs] Too many to mention? [Laughs]

**MH:** Too many to mention!

**JD:** That was just another one of the directions your artwork has gone is...

**MH:** Well, my first quilt Aunt Laura helped me make. I was nine years old. It was called a nine patch. It wasn't very pretty either, but I was proud of it.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. And you've gone on from there to do some things that are truly artistic.

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** Now what about the other kinds of work that I can think of just offhand? There's crewel, and needlepoint.

**MH:** Yes.

**JD:** Have you done any of that?

**MH:** Yes, I have done some needlepoint. I found that kind of tedious, so I didn't do a lot. But I'm going to do some now that I...to incorporate some black jet nail heads that were on my mother's wedding dress.

**JD:** Mmmm.

**MH:** I think that would be a nice way to...to preserve them.

**JD:** What are you going to do? Some sort of design then that can be framed or...?

**MH:** No, I'm going to cover a wooden box, a document box with it.

**JD:** Oh. Oh, that sounds fascinating.

**MH:** It sounds like a big job and it is, too. [Chuckles]

**JD:** Mmmm. Well, we haven't even really gotten around to, I guess, the second part of your life yet. Hmmm, so let's begin with no more hemming and hawing around. We haven't even mentioned dolls. And somehow I have a feeling that you're going to be remembered for dolls probably in a greater way than you've ever even...than you'll be remembered for draperies, although *I* will remember you for draperies.

**MH:** Well, I think I've pretty much been forgotten about draperies because I've been out of it.

**JD:** [Laughs] Except for people like me, hmmm?

**MH:** Well, yes. [Laughs]

**JD:** Have to be as old as I am to remember that!

**MH:** [Laughing]

**JD:** Well, how did you first get interested in this collecting and restoring of dolls?

**MH:** Well, it...that...it's kind of strange. Because when I began thinking about the things I would do when we retired, I...I knew I wouldn't be hard pressed to find something to keep busy with, because I had so many things I enjoyed doing. But I'd kind of sort of excluded doll collecting, because I had friends who did it, and I thought it was kind of messy. You had dolls over...all over *everything*.

**JD:** Takes a lot of room, doesn't it?

**MH:** [Chuckles] Yes, it does.

**JD:** [Chuckles]

**MH:** It almost crowds you out of your...your home. As a child, I had had so many dolls. And none of them survived. I think it was 1909 there were one dozen dolls under our Christmas tree, and nine of them were for me! [Chuckles]

**JD:** [Chuckles]

**MH:** So many uncles and aunts, and relatives, grandpas and grandmas and that. I got dolls and dolls.

**JD:** They knew you'd love to sew for them. [Chuckles]

**MH:** Well, I'd...I was really too small then, but I...I'd...my two favorites, which were two china-haired dolls, one...china head dolls. One was a brunette, and one was blonde, Susie and Sadie.

**JD:** [Chuckles]

**MH:** I can...they existed long enough so I did sew for them.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But I...anyway, I wasn't going to collect dolls. But I got involved in a rummage sale. Well, I went to this rummage sale to take a neighbor down. And it had been going on for three days. And they were about to...starting to pack up. And here laid a doll. And it...in, oh, a sad state. Her...she was all there but her wig, but her body was unstrung. And so I paid a dime for it. I thought, well, I'll take that home, and fix it up, and put it in the museum.

Well, it sat on the shelf for several months, and then I did get it down and got some elastic. I strung it together and took some hair that had been cut from my head when I was in high school. [Chuckles] And made a wig for it. And [sighs] I...when I thought about dressing it, I got the underwear all right, but I couldn't remember how any of my dolls had been dressed. I found a picture of myself when I was nine years old with my Aunt Laura in a dress that she had made for me. And so I dressed the doll like that. And after doing that, then I was...I was hooked, as they say.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** I could see dolls...everyplace.

**JD:** Oh...Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And then...and that doll got the title of "Little Me" and she's number one in my large collection that I now have.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Well, then you began to *make* dolls. I recall that you've got quite a lot of dolls in your apartment that are just right from scratch. Now who or what occasioned that?

**MH:** Well, I always liked to make everything, you know. Anything that I possibly could make was a challenge to me. [Coughs] And at this...

**JD:** You go ahead and have a drink of water, Mildred. [Pauses] Okay.

**MH:** Hmm...I've had a...got a request to dress some dolls for a project that was being worked on at that time. And they were to be dressed in the costumes of Indians, and fur traders, and people who were around when the...

**JD:** Early historical characters.

**MH:** Yes. Mmmm-hmmm. And they told me to go buy the dolls. Well, as I looked at...thought about that, I couldn't see where these plastic, modern dolls would do anything for an Indian costume or a fur trader. And I had been to a class in papier-mâché, and I had made one face that you could recognize as a human.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** [Laughs] And I was kind of tempted to try and make it. And I thought long enough, and I thought, well, they would be crude, but maybe they would contribute a little something to the crude costumes. So I proceeded to make three of them, and I presented them. This project was called *The Story of Red River Land*. That was in 1967 and it was produced by North Central, the council for school television. It was shown over KFME Channel 13, the author was Erling Nicolai Rolfsrud. Well, anyway, I made the dolls and...three of them, and I took them to him for

his approval. And he readily accepted them. And so I went home and made the rest. And they were used in this television series. And they were returned to me.

**JD:** How many dolls...Red River dolls did you have then at that point?

**MH:** Nine.

**JD:** Nine.

**MH:** Nine.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But looking at them, and being exposed to our North Dakota and Minnesota history, I kind of had the bug, and I wanted to make more. You know, as...when I was in school, they didn't teach much history about our states. And if they did, it was always sort apologetic. And so we didn't know much about North Dakota, and much less about Minnesota, because I grew up on the North Dakota side. But I got interested. And the more I read, the more I was fascinated with it. So I decided to make some more characters. And by the time I got done with that bunch, I had twenty-six dolls, and they took us from the first settlers, or the Indians, up to about the turn of the century.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** Well, I had those dolls for a long time, and they were very popular for entertainment. I was requested to show them at libraries and schools (many, many schools) and to different organizations, and they exhibited them in the banks. And I kind of got attached to them. Well, then the time came where I fractured my ankle. You don't go very far with a cast like that.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** So I decided to make some more. I thought, well, it would just be fun to make the people that I can remember.

**JD:** Oh, yes.

**MH:** People who were around as I was growing up.

**JD:** Sure.

**MH:** So I added thirty more to the collection.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** They're not mine any longer, because I have given them to the Cass County Historical Society. And after it is open you will be...open, able to view them at the museum, at the Heritage Center.

**JD:** Oh, I'm so glad to hear that those dolls are going to be viewed for many, many, many years and that they've found a permanent home.

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** That's nice for us to know.

**MH:** I particularly had fun making the last three. By going through some of my scrapbooks, I found an invitation to a summer party that my grandparents had sent out in 1886. And it was...their place was called [unclear –sounds like wild rice stock] farm. They had built their new home and a new barn, and this party was a dedication of the new barn.

**JD:** Oh.

**MH:** And it then was...

**JD:** Barn warming, I guess they called that.

**MH:** A barn warming, yes. Mmmm-hmmm. And it was customary.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And that went on for many, many years until Prohibition came along. And you know what that did to barn dances...

**JD:** [Chuckles]

**MH:** But before that, the barn dances had been a *big* part of the social life of the people. Well, I decided to do something about that [chuckles] so I made a pair, a man and a woman who were dancing, and a violinist, a fiddler.

**JD:** Oh...

**MH:** And I have really had a lot of fun doing that.

**JD:** Mmmm. And just a little earlier today you told me about some...that you are...still have three in mind. Was it three in mind that you want to make of the Indian group? What...? You told me about that. And it was yesterday...



**MH:** Oh, yes, yes. I have gotten the material together and I have sculpted the heads. I want to make Indians to depict the Song of Hiawatha. I want to make Hiawatha, Minnehaha, and Old Nokomis with the baby Hiawatha.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. Well, now, the dolls that you have constructed are not limited, I know, to the Red River dolls.

**MH:** Oh, no.

**JD:** Although those Red River dolls are...are good-sized. Hmmm...what are they, about twenty inches?

**MH:** About twelve to fourteen inches.

**JD:** Oh, it's fourteen...fourteen inches.

**MH:** Fourteen or fifteen inches, yes.

**JD:** Yes. And but...hmmm, before that, or in between that, or along the way...I *know*, because I have some myself, I've got a couple of cornhusk dolls. [Clears throat] Where did that idea come from?

**MH:** Ah, I don't know, that just...[chuckles] I just...maybe I saw one someplace or read about it. But I did make...I started to make them. And I made, oh, hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of them. They were just great at church bazaars.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And some of them I dyed the husks with the dye and put color into them, but the most popular ones were the natural ones.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Oh, that...and these were for table decorations...and that kind of decorating.

**MH:** Oh yes, table decorations.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Yes.

**MH:** They were great for that.

**JD:** Hmmm, I also know that you have made kitchen witches and that special Norwegian character because *we have one!*

**MH:** [Chuckles]

**JD:** Well, tell us about that.

**MH:** [Sighs] Well, years back, I made a witch that was absolutely *horrible*. And I was chairman of a group at that time and so in October we used her for a table decoration. And to make it interesting, I researched a little bit about witches, and told a story of the...Tituba, the East Indian girl in Boston that was accused of being a witch and burned at the stake. And I kind of got a liking for making ugly faces. [Laughs]

**JD:** Mmmm. [Laugh]

**MH:** [Laughing] And so I continued on with it.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** With the big Norwegian witch. Oh, she's very ugly. She's not really a bad...in Norwegian folklore she's not really a bad witch. She'll help you.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But you have to give her coffee when she comes. In fact, she carries a coffee pot on her broomstick.

**JD:** [Chuckles]

**MH:** And then I went into the kitchen witches that became so popular.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. I think you were into those kitchen witches before the stores all had them for sale, as I recall.

**MH:** Oh yeah, I did.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** Yeah. And another project in dolls was just a simple clothespin doll. I...the Pioneer Daughters were looking for something to raise money to keep the cabin that they sponsored at Bonanzaville. So I thought, well, that this clothespin doll is simple. Most anybody could make it. [Laughing] And I found out it wasn't true though!

**JD:** [Laughs]

**MH:** So I got a bunch of women around my dining room table and instructed them. Not...I could see there weren't going to be too many doll makers out of that, but one particular person worked real hard at it. And I didn't get any offers of their service after that, so I made them for the...maybe the first year. And...

**JD:** Well, now how...? What are we talking about now in numbers?

**MH:** The clothespin...

**JD:** And you know, like how many hundreds of dolls did you make for sale for Bonanzaville?  
[Chuckles]

**MH:** Oh, well, I...I don't know. The first one, probably a couple of hundred.

**JD:** [Unclear.]

**MH:** Because they were...people readily bought them.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. I know!

**MH:** And then I had so many other things. One of the women who had been at this class finally came up. She and her sister had decided to then make them, so they took it over. And you know, that's twenty years ago, I guess, and that project is still going on, and they've sold thousands, and thousands, and thousands of them.

**JD:** Oh...it's a real...it's a real trademark at Bonanzaville, that little...that little...

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm. The first ones we...I think we sold for fifty cents, and now they sell for two dollars.

**JD:** Is that right?

**MH:** And they've gone all over the world.

**JD:** Oh, I'm sure.

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** Well, that's just one of your *many* wonderful ideas. Hmmm...

**MH:** Well, the first doll that I made that I really am proud of and I love comes from a story my mother told me. She was nine years old when she rode the covered wagon with her family to Dakota Territory. And before they left Iowa, of course, they got ready, they made...mended everything, and got new what they could afford. And my mother had never had a doll. And she'd had stuffed ones that her mother had made, but I suppose they got shabby. So her mother had taken a new gunnysack (that's what we call burlap now) and washed it, and rolled it up, and I suppose tied a string around the neck and around the waist, and sewed some pants buttons on it for eyes.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** I know they were pants buttons because that's what my mother told me they were. But you try and find that...pants buttons in this day of zippers!

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** That's another problem.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** Well, after my mother had passed on, and I had started with dolls, I thought of that story. And one day at the lake we were cleaning the tool house, and there was a burlap bag and it was fringed on the edge. And somehow or other that doll story came to me. So I washed it, and made the doll from the burlap bag, and with the pants buttons. And that became a popular number, very popular number.

**JD:** I think that's what's so wonderful about you, Mildred, you see a clothespin...I see a clothespin; you see a clothespin dressed like a doll.

**MH:** [Chuckles]

**JD:** I see an old gunnysack with holes in it, dirty.

**MH:** [Chuckles]

**JD:** And you see what can be made with it.

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** And I think that is such a wonderful quality. I remember another little character that you have made lots and lots of, and that comes out of Norwegian folklore. The *nisse*?

**MH:** Yes.

**JD:** [Unclear].

**MH:** *Nisse* is singular and *nisser* is plural.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But I have so many...made so many that I'd have to talk about *nisser*.

**JD:** Yes, I want you to!

**MH:** [Laughs] I have great love for Norwegian folklore. And I have a book that...it was written in the Norse and then translated to the English. And I thought, well, that would be fun to make

several of these characters. But the only ones that I could find that I could make anything that was attractive was the *nisser*, the little Norwegian elf who is supposed to be the spirit of the original landowner.

**JD:** Oh...

**MH:** And he hangs around that land. [Coughs] Pardon me. To see that it's taken care of. And if you do right by the land, the *nisser* will do right by you.

**JD:** Mmmm.

**MH:** On Christmas Eve he will help you feed your stock, and carry your wood, and things like that. But if you're not good, he'll play mean little tricks on you. He'll scare the children, and hide grandma's knitting, and he'll trip up the men who come home who've had a little too much ale, and things like that.

**JD:** [Chuckles]

**MH:** But he turned out to be *so* cute. And each one is a pleasure to make because it has a different expression. And I...

**JD:** How big are they?

**MH:** Oh, they're about five inches tall.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And sometimes they sit on a little stump.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And...but if you've done right by your farm, and if you leave rice out for them, they'll do lots of favors for you.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. I've seen lots of these little *nisser* about, and you've created quite a market for this little fellow.

**MH:** Yes, I have. I've been doing it for fifteen years. And I've...

**JD:** And I assume you've had a little help here from various people?

**MH:** No.

**JD:** Or how do you do this?

**MH:** No, no. I do it all myself.

**JD:** How do you market it?

**MH:** Oh, well, the marketing, yes, that comes through...like my...all of my work did: word of mouth.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. People see it, and they ask who made it, and...

**MH:** People see it and...friends who see it who have...who belong to different things, bridge clubs and other clubs, they...they promote some...[Chuckles]

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And I have one friend who is a teacher. And she really disposes of them for me. She takes them to school and she uses them when they study about Norway and Norwegian folklore.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And...another dear friend who belongs to many, many things, and has a host of friends, she takes them to her home and she'll just...she disposes of a lot of them.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And now that so many people just like to come to my house and get them. In fact, they have been...I know of instances where they've been sent to the Orient, and to many places, many countries in Europe, and England.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Well, that's just wonderful.

**MH:** Yes.

**JD:** Hmmm, Mildred, you've...we've talked a bit about Bonanzaville, but I know that your interest in Bonanzaville did not stop with the clothespin dolls. You just kind of wearied of that and wanted to get on to something else. And I know, because I've seen you out at Bonanzaville doing some other kinds of things. Would you like to tell me about that?

**MH:** Well...[coughs] And that's where I've got my first start in spinning. After working out at Bonanzaville and getting the first log cabin established, I decided to learn to spin. I had been dusting a couple of spinning wheels for a long time. And I had a friend who lived over the hill from my lake cabin who was a spinner. So I...she kindly let me come and watch her spin one afternoon and I was...infected by that bug right there. I got a fleece and washed that, and believe me, that's not a pleasant job!

**JD:** I was going to ask you to go through this part, because I know there are lots of people listening that don't have any idea of how...what to do with a spinning wheel.

**MH:** Well, the first...you have to find someone who will sell you a fleece. And of course that's very dirty, and it takes some washing. You...first, you sort it, and it's filled with straw, and burrs, and dead ticks, and sand, and oil, etcetera; really quite a job to wash it. But it's...it's a new experience, and nothing like that ever bothered me if I could see what was coming ahead.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** Well, I got my fleece washed, and I took some of it. Then the dear lady told me...showed me how to card it. That's where you lay all your fibers in one direction, and you make it in a roll, and then you can spin it. But I spent a couple of hours, and then I went back to my cabin and I started to spin and...[Laughs] I tell you...

**JD:** Where does this carder come in? You know, the...the thing that...that you card the wool with? We have one of those somewhere around. Now what...what do you...? How...? What does...where does that operation come in?

**MH:** Well, you have to do that before you spin.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** So you get your...all of this foreign matter and the knots and things out of it.

**JD:** Ah...so then you just...with this fluffy business.

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** You've got a whole bunch of fluffy wool.

**MH:** Yes.

**JD:** Yes.

**MH:** And then you roll it into little rolls. They're called rolags. And you take one at a time and you put it in through the orifice and the...the spindle twists it and which makes yarn.

**JD:** Into the yarn.

**MH:** Well, anyway, I got some of the wool to go through that orifice, and started to wind on the spindle, and it was really lumpy. [Laughs] But I had the courage to go out to Bonanza during Fair Week and I started to spin. Well, it was fun, because I had no competition to show me up, there was nobody there who even knew...

**JD:** [Laughs] Knew better, hmmm?

**MH:** ...knew...knew what I was doing, so they accepted it. But I made a lot of people happy.

**JD:** This was your basic training, was it?

**MH:** That's right! [Laughs]

**JD:** [Laughs] Well, then you began...then this began to accumulate, all this...ah...what do you want to call it, raw yarn?

**MH:** Yeah, yeah. Mmmm.

**JD:** I mean, yarn that was of just the fleece color.

**MH:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** And then I know that...hmmm...from visiting your home I've seen batches of yarn hanging of various beautiful shades and so on. I wish you'd tell us about that part.

**MH:** Well...[sighs] I didn't care to knit...you had to use this yarn up, you know, you couldn't just keep it...let it stack up.

**JD:** Sure.

**MH:** And by that time people were so needlework-conscious that I decided to do needle weaving. Well, I dyed it, and I made some of the dyes. I used the natural dyes. But that was a lot of work and you didn't get too many colors. But I had...previously I had dyed wools for my hooked rugs, so I had a very fast color dye that...and the shades were very lovely, they weren't...weren't loud. And hmmm...

**JD:** How did you get those shades? I think that's an interesting...

**MH:** Well, you could get five shades from the same color if you learned how to...to...

**JD:** You just dipped it in longer?

**MH:** Mmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. Yes.

**JD:** Something like what they do with candles to get the right shade, they keep...?

**MH:** Well, I haven't made candles.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.



**MH:** But...oh, I did when I was a kid. I made some crude ones.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** Now you measure your dye, and you measure your...you weigh your wool and that.

**JD:** Yes.

**MH:** And then...

**JD:** And then you...

**MH:** You use a mordant to make fast color.

**JD:** Yes.

**MH:** But I...

**JD:** You mentioned natural dyes. And I think that that's kind of interesting. I can remember from my childhood, onionskins that made the yellow shades.

**MH:** Mmmm. Mmmm-hmmm.

**JD:** And we did that when we dyed Easter eggs. But then what are some of the other kinds of things that you used?

**MH:** Oh, sumac and...hmmm...

**JD:** What color does sumac make?

**MH:** I don't...hmmm...most of the natural dyes either make a beige or a yellow.

**JD:** Beiges, browns, and yellows.

**MH:** Ah, very few make green or red.

**JD:** Ah. Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And no blue.

**JD:** Yes.

**MH:** And they're all very much the same color.

**JD:** Sure.

**MH:** But...

**JD:** Kind of earth...earth tones then.

**MH:** They're kind of very neutral.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But I did find one interesting things. I finally found a use for cockelburs.

**JD:** Hmmm.

**MH:** You know how they...irritating they are.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** The horses tails and in your clothing if you get near them. But they made a lovely soft beige that was different than the others.

**JD:** Hmmm.

**MH:** Of course, that was hard to do. You picked them with a stick and put them in the water. [Chuckles] You didn't get near them. [Laughs]

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But by boiling them and then straining out the liquid you could make a lovely dye. And mushrooms, some mushrooms...I have a lovely wall hanging that I made of...the design is of mushrooms, but the shades in the background of the weaving were made from big, brown mushrooms that grew around my lake cabin.

**JD:** You talk now about needle weaving, and I'm not sure that all of the people who are listening now would know what exactly that was.

**MH:** No. And a knit...usually, weaving is done on loom where you...and in strips, or squares, or something like that.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** But this is in hmmm...sort of an embroidery. You don't use a regular loom, you use a hook, or a box, or a branch, and you warp that. And usually it's left in for the frame. And you don't use a shuttle, you use a needle with the long lengths of your thread. And there's a...it's just unlimited, you can do *anything*.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And that's what I started doing. And I wouldn't get one finished until the other...another one was already forming in my mind.

**JD:** You know, I...I just *know* that the people that are listening to us have no idea of the *quantities* of these things that you have done because...Like myself, I'll do one or two or three things and then I quit. But what do you do, one- or two- or three hundred?

**MH:** [Laughs] Well, maybe, I'm short of that!

**JD:** I don't know!

**MH:** Well, like the dolls, when you give demonstrations, people want them.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And as that to...I was kind of in the front of all of the needle weavers and the spinners here. And I had it...right away I got calls from clubs, and groups, and classes, and schools to demonstrate. Well, I took my needle weavings along and I seldom brought any of them home.

**JD:** [Chuckles]

**MH:** I particularly remember one call that came in a hurry. There was a meeting of...a regional meeting of the Flying Farmers. And of course they brought their wives along, and there was to be a luncheon for the wives. And the lady...this was from...was from the western part of the state who had written to Barbara Watson at Dayton's for a style show. Well, she couldn't book them for that particular date because she was already booked. And they asked her if she could refer her...them to someone who would be interesting. And I had recently worked with her at the Centennial Style Show. So she gave them my name. And I got a call, and three days later I was out at the Holiday Inn...hmmm...spinning. [Laughs] And I particularly enjoyed that one because...ah, of the two...And in the introduction, I told them that I was...they wanted to know who I was. And I said oh, I was just an old woman who was hooked on spinning. But I said, "In my young days, I was pretty much hooked on the very same thing your husbands are." And I told them about my experience of meeting a young man who was an aviator. [Laughs]

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And flying with him. And they sat just entranced by the spinning and the demonstration. And the minute I said I was done, they came in a wave right up there, and my tables were bare.

**JD:** [Laughs] Oh, that's wonderful. Your...along this line, I recall that one of your friends has commented on your productivity. and she used a fascinating expression.

**MH:** [Laughs] Oh...she spent a Sunday afternoon...she and her sister at our house, and viewed the different things. And then I got a note from her later and she referred to that as “inexhaustible making-ness.”

**JD:** [Laughs] Wonderful! Hmmm, I’m going to ask you a question that I *know* you’ve been asked before. How come you can do all these things?

**MH:** Well, I have a very simple little philosophy. If you see something that you think you might like to do, try it, sometimes it works! [Giggles]

**JD:** Well, does that tie in somehow with, as you’ve said, your philosophy of life? You think...you pretty much think that if a person really wants to, and tries it, they can do it?

**MH:** Sure, they can.

**JD:** Just like Grandma Moses and her pictures?

**MH:** That’s right.

**JD:** Ah. Well, I kind of think they’re...

**MH:** I’m not quite as old as Grandma Moses, but I...

**JD:** Oh, no, but you’re...

**MH:** I mean...I’m trying to make it! [Laughs]

**JD:** You’re sneaking up on that, Mildred. [Laughs]

**MH:**[Laughs]

**JD:** Well, I want to thank you for sharing part...parts of your life with us. Hmmm. I do thank you.

**MH:** Well, I thank you for...for accepting me. I...the things I have done have opened so many doors to me and I’ve made so many friends and there are memories, such a...a big part of the future days of my life.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**MH:** And *you* are one of them.

**JD:** Thank you. You have not retired yet, Mildred Heifort.

[End of interview]

