

Anna Cornell

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Abstract: Anna M. Cornell (1913-) is the daughter of John Cornell and Lilla M. Cornell who was born and raised in Metuchen at 48 Thomas Street. Her father was a building contractor and her grandfather worked for Thomas Edison. She graduated from Metuchen High School in 1931 where she received scholarships from the Borough Improvement League and Rider University. After graduating from Rider University in Lawrence Township, she started working for the Metuchen school system in 1935. She served as an administrative secretary for Franklin School for over sixty-two years. Ms. Cornell moved with her family into the brick house at 8 Cornell Place during the 1930s. The house has since been demolished and replaced with a commuter parking lot for the Metuchen Railroad Station. Ms. Cornell was an active member of the Mt. Zion Chapter Order of Eastern Star (O.E.S.) No. 116, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the Julia T. Roth Council, Daughters of America. She now lives in Wichita Falls, Texas.

The following transcription is from a local presentation by Ms. Cornell about the history of the Metuchen school system that includes the three Franklin Schools, Moss School, Edgar School, Campbell School, and the present-day high school. Ms. Cornell spends the time discussing her memories of the Franklin School and shares her picture collection with the audience. She also takes questions from several audience members. Some questions and conversations at the end of the presentation are unintelligible due to the quality of the recording.

Interview note: Audience members during this presentation cannot be accurately identified. Therefore, these individuals will be generically identified as “Audience 1,” “Audience 2,” and so forth.

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A. Cornell: [background conversation] **Do you hear me?**

Audience 1: Yeah, go to—

Audience 2: Go right up, I have the microphone on. Would you like a chair?

A. Cornell: **No. [audience chatter]**

Audience 3: That’s the wire. [audience chatter]

A. Cornell: Yes. [long pause as presentation begins]

I have a picture here and you had produced it, I believe, at the Metuchen [Public] Library of the first Franklin School, which is now the B.I.L. [Borough Improvement League] building. That was erected in 1846¹ [incorrect date]. And then there was a two-story Franklin School in the front yard of the present Franklin School and that was a two-story affair, which was separated into two pieces and moved to New Street². It was made into flats; it was what apartments were called in those days. The present brick Franklin School was built in 1907, and was opened and used in 1908 for pupils until 1985 when it was closed because of declined enrollment³. A full four-year course was established in the Franklin High School (Metuchen High School) in 1908. Before that, perhaps they dropped out of school in the eighth grade, the ninth grade, or somewhere along the way.

The Edgar School was built in 1918 and it served pupils in Grades K to 6 from the neighborhood. I had attended Edgar School from Grade 1 through Grade 6, and then I was moved down to Franklin School where they housed [Grades] 7 through 12.

The Moss School was built in 1927 to house [Grade] K to 6 pupils in the neighborhood.

And the Campbell School was built in 1952 for [Grades] K to 3, and then it was enlarged from 1954 to house [Grade] K to 6 pupils.

Metuchen is great for additions. We've had five additions on the old Franklin School. We've had additions on the Edgar School, the Moss School, the Campbell School, and the new high school.

In 1958, the new Metuchen High School was built on Grove Avenue to house Grades 9 through 12 from the entire town. From September 1959, there were no more tuition pupils in Metuchen from Edison Township and Piscataway Township. And of course, our enrollment really took a dive at that time. We were very proud of some of our students who came back to us. One Piscataway tuition pupil returned to us as principal of our high school. We had one high school secretary saying, "You have to be nice to him. You don't know when they'll come back for your boss." [audience laughter] Of course, one of our graduates, Tony Yelencsics [Anthony M. Yelencsics] from Edison Township, became mayor for years. We were quite proud of Tony and Robin.

The original wooden [and brick] Franklin School was a three-story thing before the fire, and the auditorium was on the top floor. And of course, they held plays, and activities, and graduations. We came down from Edgar School and attended an assembly at the high school on the top floor. All these big people there [were]

¹ The Old Franklin Schoolhouse (present-day Borough Improvement League building) was constructed ca. 1807 as Metuchen's first school.

² The larger two-story framed structure was built in 1870 at the corner of Middlesex Avenue and Center Street to replace the original schoolhouse. This building was later moved to New Street to make way for the third Franklin School, a large brick Colonial Revival building, that was constructed in 1907.

³ In 1957, the front section of the building was destroyed by fire forcing the district to send its high school students to Perth Amboy. In 1958, a new high school was built along Grove Avenue and the Franklin School was converted to a middle school until 1985. Franklin School was demolished in 1999.

old enough to be our fathers and we were quite taken aback. The auditorium, of course, on the top of that Franklin School was not air-conditioned in the early twenties and some of them become so hot and bothered, they fanned themselves or palmy fan or faint. [audience chuckling] And they tell me, some pupils had even their parents there and then they didn't graduate for some reason, and their mothers would be ready to pass out from embarrassment.

[microphone feedback] Am I doing something wrong?

Audience 4: That's all right. You just got too close to the microphone.

A. Cornell: Oh, thought maybe I was static. [audience laughter]

We had one principal, Mr. [Thomas G.] Van Kirk, and he would stand at east window at the left of the front double doors and ring a dinner bell to hurry the youngsters along before they were caught with a tardy bell. And Dr. [Carl] Roos⁴, who was our elementary principal for years, called Metuchen "Path Town." Every empty house or lot had a path. Franklin School had a path going across the street to Pearl Street and New Street, the other corner was cut off by a path going toward the Lake Avenue [Lehigh Valley] Railroad pass and the American Legion Hall. So Mr. Van Kirk could stand with his bell and see kids coming from two directions, and they'd all be breathless and then he'd hurry them some more. [audience laughter]

Bear with me, this looked better yesterday. [audience chuckling] We had everything from kindergarten to twelfth grade in the Franklin School, and so they divided the exits for safety. The seniors, of course, used the front door. That was prestige. And the kindergarteners went out the west door facing Central Avenue. Somebody else went out the east door towards Center Street, which is very confusing since the names are nearly alike.

After the destruction of the front of Franklin School by fire in 1957, our guidance director went around through the halls that were left. Of course, the clock system was all melted down and he had a handbell and he'd signal for the time to pass to the next class. He was our town caller. And of course, our senior high school kids went down to Perth Amboy for the rest of the year. Since the fire was just at the end of September, there was still nine months of school to go and we had to have the 180 days that year just as an ordinary year—no favors, no extensions. The Perth Amboy schools offered us space to have our classes. Westfield offered us space to have our classes. They offered us space at Camp Kilmer, but of course, they were just empty barracks—no desks, no chairs, no schoolbooks, no science equipment, none of that good stuff. Of course, they had to make an immediate decision to continue the education of the pupils who were waiting to make their 180 days. They had a meeting at the president's house that night; everybody smelled the smoke and paper, but they (the board) decided to accept the offer of Perth Amboy. I sometimes wonder if Metuchen would have been as kindly and offered space to Perth Amboy. They went on double session. They went in the

⁴ Carl Roos began his educational career in 1922 as a fifth-grade teacher at the American Legion building, which was originally an annex to Franklin School. After teaching seventh and eighth grades, he was made principal at Franklin School. In 1930, he was named supervisor of all elementary schools in Metuchen and he held that position until his retirement in 1954.

morning; we used those same classrooms in the afternoon. They would even provide us with substitutes if some our teachers didn't make it. We only had one substitute who'd make that trip. The children went after lunch. They didn't return to their Metuchen homes until seven in the evening. We had bus trouble that year; we had to change bus contractors. The buses were breaking down, they were dirty, the seats were torn, and children were being jounced around. So everything happened. And Perth Amboy conducted adult school, so they used those same rooms in the evening. So you wonder when they cooled off, and when they were swept. [audience laughter] That was what you call a compact.

They were talking about the roads on your new map, and one source I found that we had all dark, dirt roads. Grove Avenue was Dark Lane and that's where all the schooners went to neck. [audience laughter] There were no street lights, no pavement, just mud. And somebody said, "We should call this 'Mud-tuchen.'" It was made all red shell mud, so it was red. So it should have read "Mud-tuchen." And of course, there were no sidewalks and they used to have snowplows, but they didn't pile the streets. They piled the sidewalks [where] everybody walked. And it was a plow with heavy timbers nailed together with a [unclear] point and it was pulled by one horse. And that was your snowplow (your horse plow).

Audience 5: Lars Rasmussen [at 311 Woodbridge Avenue] was the one that rented the horse.

A. Cornell: That's right. And then they didn't pile the streets. The cars were on their own. [audience chuckling] So they had to make their own way. And of course, there was a time when Route 27 was very busy with the cars in existence. And then they had some buses besides the train transportation, and they wouldn't quite make this corner down here where the [Metuchen] Foodtown used to be [at the southwest corner of Lake Avenue and Middlesex Avenue]. It's Edwards [Food Store] now. And they'd go through Dr. [Alonzo] Hunt's hitch, right on in there, this porch, but they made it. I wonder what they do now? The speed they're driving, they'd exit out the back of the house.

The one source I found a note that a teacher came and stayed with a Metuchen family, the Moss family, for forty years. Do you think he was a long-term boarder? [audience laughter] But that was the way they would do it in those times. They leave the battle; you supplied their lodging. Of course, I knew a lot about the old [First] Presbyterian Church, but you're not interested in that. But I have a number of pictures I'd like to show. [talking off-hand] That's not the newest one. I had a good press agent; I hit the purse more than you can believe.

[start of the picture presentation]

This is a picture of Dr. [Mildred B.] Moss, who retired as a principal in Moss School (Washington School). And then they renamed it for her⁵. For some happy reason, I was selected to be there because I was her first-grade student at Edgar School and my grand-niece was there because she was her latest second-grade pupil at Moss School before she moved to Texas.

⁵ Washington School was renamed the Mildred B. Moss School by the Metuchen Board of Education in 1966. The Metuchen Parent Teacher Association (PTA) requested the name change in recognition of Dr. Moss' contributions to the borough's education in her forty-eight years of service. Dr. Moss was hired as a second-grade teacher at Edgar School in 1918; she moved to Washington School in 1927 and became principal in 1954.

As I told you, Edgar School housed [Grades] 1 to 6 and then they finally put a kindergarten there. And then we walked down to Franklin School for home economics and sewing. And then you returned to your home from that school; you didn't have to go back and check in at Edgar School. And now they're going to remodel that, even taking out the original park and replacing it.

And this is another picture of Moss School. You see my papers are aging. They're yellower and yellower and yellower.

And this is another picture of the Franklin School.

And then the Campbell School was built on a baseball field that we used. Everybody used it. They used it for football, baseball. And then they built the school on it so they named it the Campbell School in honor of William [Thomas] Campbell, a Metuchen citizen who was very much interested in children and their education. Here's a picture of Mr. Campbell, Mr. [Elmo Eugene] Spoerl⁶, and then the architect was a gentleman on crutches and he could remarkably get around in all these construction piles and all. He was very agile.

And this is the cornerstone laying of Campbell School. There's still another picture of Campbell School. There was a time when the Board of Education produced one of these things every month. And they were very newsy. And they went home to their parents, and it seemed very helpful. And that went on for several years.

[talking off-hand] I think it must have fallen off.

This is Main Street, dirt street, [unclear] street. [audience chuckling]

[talking off-hand] Not going to find that one.

This was something published a few years ago by the League of Women Voters and that was helpful. A lot of information there if you'd like to look better.

And this was a missile produced by the Metuchen Public Schools, and this was in the 1976. So over the years, they used a number of [unclear] ways to educate the parents, or to help explain what we were trying to do to the parents.

And then this is a picture of the fire [at] the Franklin School. There was a Highland Park highrise pumper out there, and that pumped and pumped and you could see it sinking further and further in the wet lawn. So I don't how they ever acted in that regard; who moves it? But after that fire, Metuchen has its own highrise [pumper].

This is our new Metuchen High School [at 400 Grove Avenue]. That was under construction when the Franklin School burned. And some folks thought we should pay the workmen double and have them finish quicker. But we didn't have the money; we'd still have an empty building and what we're going to do

⁶ Elmo Eugene Spoerl started out as a mathematics teacher in 1916 and then served as the high school principal from 1927 to 1948. He later became supervising principal and held that position until his retirement in 1951.

with the kids in the interval. So that was proposed. Then somebody else said, “It’s too bad the Franklin School didn’t all burn down! They would have taken care of the whole thing right then.” [audience laughter] And then there was a time years ago when there was a WPA [Works Progress Administration] proposal to build a school near the corner of Grove Avenue near the Jewish synagogue [Neve Shalom at 250 Grove Avenue]. And that was turned down by the voters; that was too far away. Here our school is built further away. So it’s quite a trip from Edgar School corner to the high school corner. And then we were no sooner open, then we had a robbery at the high school. They broke in and they stole all of our nice, new cafeteria equipment. And they found it was a professional job; they weren’t amateurs. They knew just what they wanted. So this all went on in 1985–no, in 1965⁷.

And here is a commencement from 1985. I have to get new eyes. And here is another piece of what they want to do with the Franklin School, and what they should do with it.

And this is a picture of the last graduation from eighth grade at the Edgar School field. And here are many press [articles] again about the closing of Franklin School. And still another picture of Franklin School. When they rebuilt the Franklin School, they didn’t replace the third floor, of course. And they didn’t have those things on the top, like a row of windows. So it did change the appearance. This was a picture of the fire situation and all the kids who said, “I wish it would burn down!” stood outside weeping. That was quite a day, huh?

And this is [the] Perth Amboy situation where they offered to take us in. This is what I was looking for before. This [annex] was on the west side of Franklin School, at one time used for home economics and the sewing. And then, after some years, was moved over to the Center Street side, east side, likewise in the building, and used for classes. And then finally it was moved over on Lake Avenue as the [Fugle Hummer Post 65] American Legion house.

Audience 6: That was about 1929.

A. Cornell: Yeah. That made the fanciness when they rebuilt the Franklin School, they put some cement all along trying to make it look nice, I guess. And we had one teacher who got her car over—one wheel got over that curbing line, and she couldn’t release it. She was stuck. [audience chuckling] So they had to rescue.

This is another commencement exercise of 1948, when Franklin School began. And Franklin School in this cupboard of this booklet / news there.

And then there was a time they produced something like this at the end of the year with all those classes, graduating classes. Pictures of the staff, need school, surprisingly small staff in these elementary schools. And Franklin School again. When they restored it, they put glass in the doors so that they didn’t wreck the solid glass. Of course, we had trouble soon because what damage the fire didn’t

⁷ According to an article in the June 3, 1965 edition of the *Metuchen Recorder*, the Newark police were able to recover some items that were stolen from the school. The article states that “the burglars apparently entered the school through the back door of the cafeteria and went through the building removing the machines from the commercial classrooms and offices.”

do, the water did. And we had a winter with snow up to here [gesturing size]. And all the beams became so soggy, they sagged. And then when they dried out, they shrunk and so your boards went this way. You could roll anything under the doors. You had to hook your foot around the leg of your desk, so you didn't roll away from—everything was downhill! [audience laughter] Never gone uphill. And if you spilled something, chase it, you know. [audience laughter]

And here's a picture of the high school faculty that's here. See, it's very interesting. They were a good crew. They were good to work with all these years. And here's the Franklin School faculty, that would be [Grades] K to 6. And this was in 1936, I believe.

And some of these teachers, you liked them. You're glad to see them next year. And some you didn't like so well when you got promoted the next grades, they promoted the teacher. [audience laughter] And taught a different sort of things, the curriculum from Metuchen High School, 1928. I have a mish-mash for you.

And this is a handbook for the Franklin School, 1927-1928. And this was her production of *School Blaze* [phonetic], some kind of literary thing. And here's a picture of the Franklin School. See what I'm talking about, the windows up there?

Audience 7: Yeah.

A. Cornell: They're there, remodeling the wall.

Audience 8: I can't get the switch. [audience chatter; background discussion about the logistics of the picture presentation]

A. Cornell: You're losing me with my elbow. I should be careful

Audience 8: Can we hear now? Somehow, we lost it.

A. Cornell: Maybe I threw my papers on here? No, let's see. Maybe I blew a fuse. [laughter]

This is a production of the English Department in 1915. And this is the eighth-grade graduating class of 1931. See all the white dresses and the dark jackets and white pants. [background chatter]

Audience 8: Now we got two experts.

A. Cornell: Something should happen. Here we go.

Audience: Oh!

A. Cornell: He's my gather-upper.

Audience 8: Okay. [chuckles]

A. Cornell: Am I out? Will you let me my time?

Audience 9: No, no, no. Now you bring the [unclear].

A. Cornell: [returning to presentation] This is a picture of the Old Franklin School that I was telling you was taken apart and moved to New Street.

[talking off-hand] Thank you.

And if you bear with me, this is a picture of my father [John Cornell] in a class in the early 1880s, 1880s. He's sitting here in the front row. And this is a schoolteacher with all this beard and that was a porch on that wooden building.

Audience 10: The Old Franklin School?

A. Cornell: That's the [second] Franklin School⁸, was built on the front lawn.

Audience 11: Let's see the picture.

A. Cornell: And here again is the Franklin School as it was before the [1957] fire, and they had little things up here. They burned the lunch stuff after lunch, and there were often wet paper towels. So we were smelling smoke the day of the fire. We thought long ago that that was coming. So here we were sitting there doing our work; there was no cop on our building. [audience laughter] They hustled us out. My typewriter ended up in the furnace room some distance away. There was a state report on my desk, took a lot of hours to make. I gathered that up, took it with me. I didn't want to try to replace all that. [audience chuckling]

And here's still another picture of the original Franklin School. Metuchen must have been stuck on the word Franklin. That made three: the old schoolhouse, this one [that moved to New Street], and the one that's going to come down soon [in 1999].

[referring to something else] That's interesting. [audience chuckling]

And I told you they had all this spring in the paper when I retired. I have a good press agent. [audience chuckling] So I did enjoy my work though. I would do it over if I had to do it again. Well, I worked with nice people; I've enjoyed the teachers, I've enjoyed the kids. Of course, after Franklin School was closed to children some twelve years ago, the only kids I saw were the disabled ones who came to special services, and they were allowed to swing on the chandelier. [audience laughter] But at least they were kids. It got to the point you might as well work at Westinghouse, you know, no kids. [audience chatter]

And here's a little booklet you might be interested in. It's the Metuchen Business Directory and it was published in 1912. And here's another little flyer for W. O. Craig, grocer. And that was when Metuchen was—Main Street was one level. And then they decided to go under the [Pennsylvania] Railroad and make the hill. And, of course, that was always flooding.

Audience: Still is!

⁸ The first Franklin School is the present-day Borough Improvement League building at 491 Middlesex Avenue.

A. Cornell: Yeah. And I was told the grocery stores were downtown, of course near that. And one little boy, he was bringing butter home for his mother, but he stopped to play baseball and the butter melted. And they didn't have like little paper things [wrappers] in those days, so I don't know how he explained that to his mother. [audience laughter]

And then there was scuttlebutt that when there were trains near the blizzard of 1888, there were trains stopped between Main Street and Lake Avenue, and they couldn't plow them out. They couldn't get them forward. They'd bring other trains in and try and push them out. And they were only more in the snow than ever, pressed in. And of course, there were people on those trains who were hungry, they were cold, and ... [recording cuts out]

[recording begins mid-sentence] ... the bakery, a child of about twelve I gather, and he got [unclear] which was just down over the railroad ... [recording cuts out]

[recording begins mid-sentence] ... people had to be fed. And of course, in those days, the tramps stopped off at the train. We were right next to the railroad; you fed them, didn't turn them down. You shared what you had, and you didn't question their honesty. They'd go off with your spoon or hold you up, not like now. [audience chuckling] I guess that's about all I have to say. [audience applause] I've run out of pages!

Audience 12: So about that bell on Firemen's Memorial by Borough Hall. It came from the original Franklin School?

A. Cornell: Yes.

Audience 12: That is true?

A. Cornell: Yeah, they wanted those little cubbies up there, I imagine. Yeah. And also, there was a sundial in honor of Mr. Spoerl when he retired. And that was on a plaque near the flagpole in Franklin School. And before they decided how to make the sundial accurate, somebody sat on this pedestal and broke it off. You know it was never assembled. It didn't seem too bad that that happened because nothing ever was done⁹.

Audience 13: How did the fire start in Franklin School?

A. Cornell: They're not sure.

Audience 13: They're not clear. [laughs]

A. Cornell: No. Well, the insurance is settled, I think. No, it started up in the upper floor. They were three sets of stairs: one came to your front door to the first floor, one set of stairs went on the sides to upstairs (the second floor), and then there was

⁹ According to an article in the October 3, 1963 edition of the *Metuchen Recorder*, the memorial to the late Elmo E. Spoerl at Franklin School was wrecked before it was finished. Members of the Metuchen Rotary Club were trying to figure out a way to salvage the sundial; damage was estimated at about hundred dollars.

still a third set of stairs. That's what I was saying about the auditorium, those parents had to get up all of the stairs. Some of them weren't too able.

Audience 14: [microphone feedback] When was the [unclear] before the bookkeeping [unclear] because we had [unclear].

[muffled background discussion]

A. Cornell: We had studied there and we always had room for teachers [unclear] for youngsters and so-and-so. So he stood up and said, "Anybody here taking physics?" [audience laughter] And they were supposed to go down to that classroom, but it never came out right. [audience laughter] People would laugh. What would they do now? Go out [unclear; loud noises].

Audience 15: Anna, how many superintendents were there?

A. Cornell: Eight in twenty-seven years. The last one that I had served as Dr. Roos's secretary for thirteen years and then Ethel Egolf died in August of one year. And looking around for a replacement, I was the lucky winner. I had worked with her for thirteen years, but I had never done her job. So I had to find my way. And so I was elected; I became the attendance office. From one place I went to visit, he'd call me [unclear]. [audience laughter]

Then he had hound dogs. Every corner around here was a dog from out of a box and we didn't know whether to retreat or go forward. [audience laughter]

[muffled background discussion]

Audience 16: I just want to say, Miss Cornell, you're in my sister's yearbook for [19]38 and you're in my yearbook for [19]48.

A. Cornell: That's very good. [multiple people talking at once about dates]

I inherited forever. I had to open the Blue Letter [unclear; multiple talking] I'm not sure what I mean, the cricket club. That was the attendance office, I assume. We had a badge. We never could find her badge, we thought we had moved them. Because at court, if the kids were out too much, there weren't enough teeth in the [unclear] to need much help. They gave them a five-day grace period to get back to school. And sometimes they just made it and they go on another period [unclear]. I followed one mother, her kid was working at [unclear] store when he finished school, he'd starve to death! [audience laughter] But he was sick from it. And then the same parent ended up in court, she tapped me on the shoulder and the council removed me from the jury up there. She says, "I want to explain it." I said, "It's too late now, you have to tell it to the judge."

Audience 17: Were you in school when the fire broken out?

A. Cornell: Yes, oh yes. We were quite busy doing our work. We didn't know we were hot. They spotted it from the playground. The physical ed teacher was out with his class and he spotted the smoke and flames coming out of the top. And here we're two stories down, didn't even know.

Audience 18: Ed, my daughter's is in seventh grade and she came home and was, "We got the medals out, we got the medals out, we got this—" Oh, it was so far, we lived across from [unclear]. Mr. Burroughs took the belt and she's an elephant [unclear].

A. Cornell: I think it was the Gettysburg Address. It used to be up at the top of the front stairs. You know we never did find out where that went. After the fire was out, that was gone too. So whether it's stuffed in some corner in that building, might be. Who knows with everything? During the war years, they were trying to have a bond drive and stir up the kids, and they were trying to bring a Jeep up the front stairs. Oh, then there was a landing about halfway up. So the Jeep got up there pretty good, but he couldn't make the rest of the way and I was waiting for him to go through that wall on the top of [unclear]. [audience laughter] Because he'd have to turn to the left, going at full steam.

Audience 19: [loud microphone feedback] I suppose you remember my sister, Mildred Leis? She was principal in the Metuchen High School there. But she always remembered when she had to ring the bell for the fire, and then she, right after, [unclear] get that to the top because they'd have to reset it and [unclear].

A. Cornell: We had a master clock in the office, the main office, and they'd have to service it on occasion. And during the summer week, they'd paid them and you know they'd varnish the clock. And the serviceman came, and they had buttons. The buttons were all varnished fast, so I get chewed on because he can't do the service. Well, I didn't do the varnish. [audience laughter]

Audience 20: Ann, just want to thank you. This will be on MEtv [public access television]. Just look, see when they air or post it. They usually post it a couple weeks to let you know when it's going to be on. And did mention the ... [recording ends]

[END OF INTERVIEW]