

BENNETT: could bring to put on our stage, don't you see. And we could enjoy every angle of it. But everyone regretted the loss of our live musicians because people liked to watch the people play. They loved to watch them as well as to hear them. And so it was mixed emotions certainly. But the play . . . the canned music and all won out. They just were there to stay.

JL: Well, what about dance halls? Did you ever have a chance . . . did you ever have time away from your teaching or studying music to go, for example, to the Trianon?

BENNETT: No, I never did.

JL: Or to any of the various dance halls because I understand they were very popular?

BENNETT: Yes, they were.

No, I never . . . dancing never came my way.

JL: So you don't really know too much about the people who . . .

BENNETT: No, I really don't. The few fellows that I went with were not dancers and they were not interested in going to a dance hall so I That wasn't . . .

JL: Were the Reliance and the Reliable still on the Wabash during your time?

BENNETT: Um hm. Yes, they were there. I believe the last time I was on one of those boats was along about 1914. And they were quite a popular thing in the summer. You could take a nice boat ride up to Fort Harrison. Then the boat swung around and brought you back to /the dock at Wabash Avenue or Ohio Street/.
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JL: Did they serve dinner on it or was it just

. . .

BENNETT: No. No. I think as I remember it, there was popcorn and pop, again you know, /or/ some kind of soft drink that you could buy.

And there was a man here by the name of Chris Stark, who played the piano on one of those boats for the dancers. In fact, Chris Stark had been a pupil of Mr. Leibing, Professor Leibing, and . . .

JL: He was a private teacher?

BENNETT: Um hm.

JL: In Terre Haute. I think you mentioned him earlier in the interview.

We'll go on to the subject of local amateur music and theater groups. Did you ever hear of the Hoosier Ensemble?

BENNETT: Oh, yes!

JL: Can you tell us what they did?

BENNETT: Um hm. It was organized by a Mrs. Daisy Robinson, who was a cellist. And they . . . it was a small group. Let's see. What is the name of it?

JL: Hoosier Ensemble.

BENNETT: Hoosier Ensemble. They had a singer, Bessie Streever Meyer, who sane, and there was the pianist and violinist -- or two violins I believe -- and Mrs. Robinson played the cello. I think that was it. Then there was another /group/. There was the Ulmer Trio which was /of/ the same caliber. They played for dinners and entertainment. They would

BENNETT: say, entertainment will be furnished by the Hoosier Ensemble or the Ulmer Trio, you know. They particularly played dinner music, even at the hotels /and were quite in demand for several years/. They played that way. /I recall Mrs. Ulmer, cellist; Helen Vendel, soprano; Rebecca Varney, violinist; Elizabeth Miller, violinist; Elizabeth Blood, pianist; Margaret Bear, pianist; and Ruth Patton, pianist, as some of the participants in these groups./

JL: I also know that in 1949 there was something here called The Municipal Musicals. Did you ever attend one of those performances?

BENNETT: Yes. They put on very nice performances of musical shows. In fact, Jackie Hughes, Mrs. Jack Hughes, had sung . . . she had the lead in Desert Song and Rose Marie and Blossom Time. They were all good musical shows and were beautifully directed. They had an excellent director.

JL: About how long did those shows go on in Terre Haute . . . about how many years?

BENNETT: Well, not over two or three years as I recall.

JL: Did something take their place?

BENNETT: Oh, I don't know. I couldn't say. They were very demanding in the rehearsal and all like that and it was hard work really. They put on some very good performances, just very good.

JL: I'm curious. Having taught this many years, you certainly have seen some changes in the attitudes of your students from when you began teaching. What effects have such things as rock and roll in the '50s and punk rock today or television or automobiles or an overabundance of extracurricular activities, what has that done to the attitude of a music student?

BENNETT: Well, there for a while . . . now after the Depression radio had come in. And people would have a little radio if they couldn't buy bread. And it took the place of young people taking music lessons. They just went radio wild. And the piano became something that they stacked magazines on and so forth. And it went on that way. They just simply . . . well, it just did away with serious study. The young people didn't care to study music. They wanted to listen to the radio. And . . .

JL: Now that was right after the Depression?

BENNETT: Um hm. And during World War II the government issued an edict that they were not going to manufacture more pianos, that the material was to be used in the war effort. And just like spoiled children, people said right now, "I want my child to have piano. I want my child to have music. I never had music and my child must have music." And the pianos were hauled out and tuned and the dust was wiped off of them and people . . .

JL: (laughs) People need a little pain, don't they?

BENNETT: Yes. And then they began, you know, hunting teachers. Well, the thing was it was an entirely new group of children that had come on. The permissiveness had come into everything and the children wouldn't count time. There was no . . . you couldn't have the influence on them. If they didn't want to do a thing, they wouldn't do it. If they didn't like the piece, they wouldn't learn it. You know it was just that. And the teachers had to just simply reorganize their thinking and everything.

Miss Hulman and I discussed that a great deal and she told me, she said, "I tell you," (and this

BENNETT: is odd for anyone who knew Miss Hulman) "It has brought me out of my ivory tower. The children rule now." She just had her students who were advanced and matured; /they/ were married and moved away, you know, into other things /to make a living/. Suddenly her class was just denuded of those that had been the fine class. It was the same with Miss Alden /and Miss Meyer/.

JL: I suppose the potential was there but the attitude /had/ changed . . .

BENNETT: Oh, yes, the potential was always there. But it was just a different . . . a different thing entirely.

Then after a while . . . now I had to continue. I had to make my living and that was the way I had to make my living. And I had to deal with it. I couldn't just close my eyes to it. So it forced me to . . . well, to work in ways that I could get a result no matter what.

JL: What was some of your strategy?

BENNETT: Well, it wasn't strategy particularly. It was to find other ways of presenting the same thing which is the basis. The basis always has to be. And I had to find different ways of presenting it to make it agreeable, as nearly as I could. And I got along pretty well with it. It wasn't always successful, but I will say that after a time, probably 10 or 15 years, the . . . oh, in the schools they began having these contests, you see, and that helped very much to bring the /to the/ attention of parents and children that there had to be certain pieces learned and that the child could not win the contest if he didn't do it well. And so I worked on that basis there.

JL: Does that attitude pretty much exist today?

BENNETT: Well, to some extent. The young people today are much more amenable to learning to play well, much more.

JL: What do you think has renewed the interest?

BENNETT: Oh, I think it's just run its course.

JL: Kind of cyclical then, people go through . . .

BENNETT: Yes. Uh-huh.

JL: Do your students still appreciate the classics and are they still willing to master the technique?

BENNETT: Um hm. I don't have too much trouble that way. The thing is they don't care to have recitals. They hate recitals. They don't want anything like that and if you have a recital, you have to . . . if it's going to be a good program, there must be a lot of nice drilling in everything -- in their performance, in their manners and how to get to the piano and get away from it, just as it was for the Rose Glee Club that time. It was their stance coming and going and all that made Mr. McCutcheon give them first place. He said, "They went on the stage like men. They sang like men. I could understand every word." It was just detail, nice detail. And that . . . that's getting better all the time. It's the way they're approached about it. You certainly don't want to humiliate them or make fun of them or anything like that. I try to make myself their friend, a part of the picture, you know, and I tell them about this episode with the Rose Glee Club and all and they listen with all their ears and so they're easier to work with. But it's not like the old way of teaching where you assigned a lesson and they had to go home and practice.

JL: Now you kind of have to make an appeal.
(laughs)

BENNETT: Yes, you do. Certainly. Um hm.

JL: I'm going to shift back for the last part of our talk to the downtown area. I want to know your feelings about it today. What hopes do you see for the planned changes for downtown Terre Haute and how do you feel about the leveling of a good many of the old buildings?

BENNETT: Well, I'm like a lot of the other people, I hate to see many of our nice buildings put out of existence. I think they . . . I do think there has been a great waste of material in many of the buildings that have been wrecked. I feel they could have been made into, as we would say, homes for old people or, you know, various things that way. And we need a good downtown hotel. The motels don't serve all purposes . . . if there are conferences and all in town. But at the present there doesn't seem to be anything to do about it, just not at all. I hate to see the contour of things change so radically. I feel now this matter of having to drive up Cherry Street in order to reach the river bridge, that it might be a little on the picturesque side. But to me, that straight line of the Old National Road that went through Terre Haute, the crossroads of the world We were the crossroads of this country, you know. It Old National Road went straight through. And the bridge was a part of it. You just went straight across the bridge. And things like that have been eliminated in many of these changes; they don't mean a thing to the people who are doing the changing. They just have a different plan in mind and that's that. But I hate to see many of the things go.

JL: Of course, one of the nice things that's helping is that there seems to be a real renewed interest in the history of Terre Haute and one of the current projects is this oral history project.

JL: I think people are becoming more aware of our heritage.

Do you think that the downtown will ever be lively, the booming spot it once was?

BENNETT: Oh, I couldn't say. (laughs) I just don't know.

There's been so much building away from town . . . out, you know, along the highway. The businesses are way out, the dentist way out, you might say, in the woods, you know, and all. There's so much of that now, where it /downtown/ used to be such a community. You knew just /where everything was located/. You could walk anywhere, /if you had to. There was a level kind of stability that filled the atmosphere/.

JL: Of course, the highway -- Interstate 70 -- has had something to do with that.

BENNETT: Yes. But they . . . I like to see them a little more consolidated. If you're going to go to town, it's nice to be able to take in several things right where you are.

JL: Um hm.

END OF SIDE 1

TAPE 3-SIDE 2

JL: Mrs. Bennett, do you think that Terre Haute is still a good place to live and if so . . . or if not, why?

BENNETT: Oh, I think it is! (laughs) I think Terre Haute is always a good place to live! I've always felt that Terre Haute is a big little town. Now some small towns are small big towns and they're

BENNETT: snobbish and, you know, /there's/ a lot of class distinction and all. But Terre Haute has always been an easy place to live. You could live as expensively or as frugally as you cared to or as your pocketbook would permit. And it doesn't matter. It just doesn't matter. I've always felt it's really a friendly place. It has always been a friendly place. And it's like with the matter of, oh, just a number of things. It seems to grow . . . let's see. It seems to always come back to around 60,000. It was 60,000 quite a while ago, you know. And then it would go up to 70,000 or maybe up around 80,000. All of a sudden we're back between 60,000 and 70,000. It just seems to be, and it isn't anything to regret. It's just the . . . say a business leaves or something that way and we're right back on the same old, good old territory. Our feet are on sort of solid ground, and I think Terre Haute is a dandy place.

And it always delights me when I've talked with people who have come here with big businesses like Pillsbury and all like that. I've taught their children, and we discuss these things. And they'll say, "I like Terre Haute. We like it. Now, we have to move. We have to go some other place, but as soon as my husband retires, we're coming back to Terre Haute. We like Terre Haute."

It's easy to live here. It's rather leisurely, you know, it's rather a leisurely place. Always has been. It makes you think of a busy little bee. (laughs) But it's rather leisurely and the . . . well, I think Terre Haute is just O.K. And I always have! (laughs heartily)

JL: Well, I thank you very, very much for a delightful conversation.

BENNETT: Well, I'm so glad to have discussed these things. And as we've talked along, I've thought,

BENNETT: oh, there is so much that is rich in our heritage that we have not touched on at all, not in the least. I'm sorry there were so many people. There were people in the teaching profession and all that. There is no chance to mention them and to give credit which I would love to do. And it's . . . we'd just have to make tape after tape after tape. But some of these days, we can.

BENNETT
and JL: (simultaneously) We can add to it.

BENNETT: Yes. (laughs) I should say, but this has been nice. I've enjoyed every minute.

JL: Thank you.

END OF TAPE 3