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Interview with Susan Kempton, Senior Library Services Supervisor; Mount Vernon Native

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Susan Kempton

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Interviewer: Trudy Andrzejewski

Interviewee: Susan Kempton, Senior Library Services Supervisor; Mount Vernon native

Location: Olin Library, Kenyon College

Date: 14 February 2012

Topic: Public Life in Knox County, Main Street

TA: This is Trudy Andrzejewski interviewing for the Rural Life Center at Kenyon College. It's Tuesday, February 14th at about 2:10 PM. Um, and this interview is taking place in Olin Library at Kenyon College. Okay, can you please state your name and occupation?

SK: My name is Susan Kempton and I work at Olin Library at Kenyon College as a Circulation Supervisor.

TA: Great, okay. So, are you from Knox County originally?

SK: Yes.

TA: How long have you been in the area?

SK: I was born here in 1950.

TA: Did you get to school around here?

SK: Yes, in Mount Vernon and East Elementary School and Mount Vernon High School and then left the area and went to college.

TA: Okay. So, I guess chronologically, in elementary school, what would you do after school? Do you have any memories of that?

SK: Ah, probably walk home with friends and play outside, usually until dinnertime. And then had dinner and did whatever little bit of homework that I usually had and then off to bed.

TA: Okay and what about high school?

SK: Well, high school I had extracurricular activities. Um, I belonged to, you know, certain clubs and had some athletic activities after school and uh, usually that kept me busy. Or, often times in high school also even at lunchtime, it was called an open lunch, where you know back then we didn't have to stay in school so a bunch of us at noontime would walk downtown and there was a restaurant on Main Street called Jody's. And it used to be there until just a few years ago. And we would go down there and have lunch,

and sit and talk and all of that and then walk back up to school and did that in an hour's time. You know, but, uh, it was fun, it was great memories.

TA: So where on Main Street was Jody's?

SK: It was, let's see, what is there right now? Is it the Pink Cupcake that's there right now? I'm not quite sure but it was right in the middle of the block.

TA: What kind of food did they serve?

SK: Uh, kind of old-fashioned, diner food. Kenyon kids used to go there a lot especially on Saturday morning she made the biggest pancakes around. They were the size of a plate. And it was an old family, they had, that restaurant was there quite a long time. Uh, Rich Cochran owned it, I think he may have started it, I'm not sure and then Jody was his waitress and she took it over from him when he bought the Alcove. And ran it after the Serlessas who owned the Alcove for many years and the food was *excellent* under them. Um, they sold it and I think that was when Rich bought it. **(3:16)**

TA: So, did a lot of high schools go down to...?

SK: Yes. It was always packed. You know, thinking back on it I wonder how she ever served that many kids but, uh, in that period of time. But uh, she kept us in order, Jody. You know, you behaved yourself or you were out the door.

TA: Were there any incidents that you can remember?

SK: Uh, Not that I can remember specifically but I'm sure there were. *(Laughs)* But, not really.

TA: Um, so when you were growing up were there a lot of restaurants in the area that you frequented?

SK: Uh, well there was the Alcove, Jody's. There was the restaurant on the corner of the Ohio Avenue...no, actually. Gambier Street & Main and that was the Ohio Restaurant which had really good food. Um, out here in Gambier, well, that's getting off the track but out here in Gambier the Village Inn was owned by a couple called The Tridipos. And it was very good then too. But, let's see in Mount Vernon oh, and then there were the drive-ins that were famous. Off, kind of off the street Mount, not Main Street exactly but One was called Beck's

TA: I've heard of that actually!

SK: Yeah, and then the other was called Clippies. And it was out on Harcourt Road. In the sixties when I was in high school, we uh, there was Cruising. It was a thing called Cruising. And, uh, you would get in your cars and you would drive from Clippies ad around and come in town and then drive down Main Street and out to Becks and sit and talk to your friends and drive right back. Well, then you would have Chinese firedrills, you know, get out of your car at the stop light and everybody gets out of the car and runs

around the car and gets back in before the streetlight would change. So, considering back then, yeah, naughty (*Laughs*) (5:25)

TA: So, a typical Friday night in high school for you, could you talk a little bit about that?

SK: Mhmm. Well, in the fall there was usually football games so we'd always go out, there would be a pep rally and maybe a bonfire before the games. And the football field at that time, for the high school, cause the high school was up on Mulberry Street, um, the football field was down on the West end and so we'd have what you'd call "Snake Dances" and all that, which is, is you hold hands and you kind of snake you know around when you're running and, um, that would usually be on the way down and then afterwards you'd walk back up, get in your cars, go to Becks or whatever, but, um see then- sometimes Friday nights, especially Friday nights, and Saturdays, also Saturday mornings, Friday nights downtown were extremely busy. My mother worked at Ringwalds department store for about 18 years often times if there wasn't a game on or something I'd pick her up and the stores close at 9 PM then on Friday night, now they're lucky if they'll stay open until 5. But they would usually close at 9 o'clock and by the time people would actually, you could actually get people out of the stores it was 9:30 so I would for her until 9:30 and then drive her home and then if I had friends to do anything with I'd do it then but, um, yeah it was extremely busy you couldn't even get through the downtown it was so crowded with traffic and everything. And the same thing on Saturdays. It was different, Mount Vernon was different then. (7:07) It was extremely busy, we had two great department stores, um, as I said my mother worked at Ringwalds but were were close friends with the Ruedens who, you know, owned the Ruedens department store downtown. And Jack, well, John Ruden, Grandpa Ruden, who founded the store took it over from the Dowd's family. And, um, Jack and Walter ran it, his brother. And Jack was, lived in the neighborhood, was friends of ours and his daughter, Sally and I, when I was little, we used to go down and play in the store at nights and he would go down and work and we'd get into some trouble sometimes we'd go into the women's shoe department and try on all the shoes or one time he caught us where he had the wedding dresses (*Laughs*), we really got in trouble then. And then, um, back then too they would have a way when you paid your bill to check on if you bought something, it was, You would put your money and they would put the money and the sales slip in a tube and then the suction, there was air and, I don't know, what I can't explain exactly the way it worked except there was this air that actually sucked it up to the office. So Sally and I one of us would go to the office and one of us would stay downstairs and we would just send notes back and forth. (*Laughs*) So, but that was, just, great memories.

TA: So who would be down there on a like Friday night, or a Saturday?

SK: Families. Um, mothers and fathers with their kids. Um, especially on Saturdays. There was a market down at the very end of Main Street called Zink's market and it was even open on Sundays and then even after church we would go down to Zinks and get fresh produce or whatever. There was also another grocery store right off the block called the Victory Market and it was one block off of Main Street and Lee Meyers ran that and he raised his own Black Angus cattle so all the meat was, he did all the butchering and

everything and it was a great market, really, really nice. Now the building is still there but it's got accountants in it right now.

TA: So when did the markets and grocery stores leave the area?

SK: When the supermarkets came. You know, when Big Bear, which used to be here in town where Kroger's is, when they came. When some of the, actually I think the Victory was bought out by Cardinal Markets. And of course, they run Neff's, where it is on South, South Main. Um, things started to change when Coshocton Avenue started to build. And you know Kroger's and there was a K-Mart, you know K-Mart, well I forget. The first fast food store was Burger Chef, that was the first fast food place out there. So things started to change you know.

TA: Are there any... What other businesses were around the area when you were growing up?

SK: On Main Street? Okay, besides Ringwalds and Ruedens there were um three men's clothing stores. LaMasters, which then later on I think when I was in high school was bought out and called Colonial Men's Wear

TA: Is that where Sips is?

SK: Yes, yes. Um, it was a great men's clothing store. Then across the street next to the Alcove, right next to the alcove on the south side of the town, on the south side of the alcove there was a great men's clothing store called Worleys. **(11:00)** And it was run by Sam Hughes (sp?). Actually it was run by Mr. Werley but Sam bought it when he let go of the penny store. And he ran it for many, many years. And, you know, when I was in high school and everything and the Kenyon Theater Festival going on – you used to see Paul Newman going in there and, you know, it was just great. A great clothing store. And there there was another one Gaults and maybe not as big or not as popular as the other two but still a thriving business. There were women's clothing, women specific – there was one called the Fashion Page and it sat at the corner or Vine and Main on the north side, and – northeast side – and it was a great, beautiful women's clothing. And the of course the alcove's been there for years. There was a millinery shop there in the early sixties. Well, when the tore down Curtis Hotel and built the new one, when it was the old Curtis Hotel there was a millinery shop called Ann Lapp's. And it was amazing. She was a very nice, older lady who sold beautiful hats. So, there were a lot of, there was a shop called the "Luggage Shop" which you could go in and naturally buy luggage but also they did work on saddles, you know, and would sell bridles, and other leather goods in there and it was a great store also. Uh, jewelry stores, Wise Jewlery, was on there then there was another Jewlery store there on the corner next to Ringwalts before, well, Ringwalts was actually torn down um, can't think of the name of it. There were a couple beauty parlors downtown. Um, Wolworths. Oh, Wolworths and Kresge's, I'm forgetting two very important. Wolworth's sat in the middle of the block where Herold's Appliacnes **(END TAPE)**

(TAPE TWO)

TA: So, if we could talk a little bit more about the Five & Dimes.

SK: Sure, well there were two in Mount Vernon. There were the Kresges, and then there was Wolworth. They were just a little different, very, very similarly naturally but very, very different as is the... Kresge's, as I remember, had the long lunch counter and as I said you could go in and smell the peanuts being roasted first thing in the morning and the coffee being made and you could go in there, a lot of people who worked downtown would go in there and have a quick breakfast. And um, of course everything was homemade back then. Uh, Wolworth's, I can't remember much about Wolworth's although it was very similar to Kresge's but I can't, I don't think they had a lunch counter. But as I said (*laughs*) you know, you would go in and buy penny candy or, everything was a penny, maybe two pennies or whatever, you would go buy your taffy and bubblegum and all of that. And maybe head of the street and go to a matinee movie at the Mount Vernon Theater which was on the Square. (1:26) And it was a beautiful old theater. It had a beautiful balcony in it and I think the movies were a quarter. It was twenty-five cents for like a Saturday matinee. For the kids show you would line up next to the Vernon Theater, there was a place called the "doughnut hole." I think I did this more when I was a little bit older, maybe Junior High or beginning of high school and you would go in there and get a cherry coke and a doughnut. And that would be at lunch time or possibly even after the movie or something. But the Five & Dime, you know, as a kid, you'd go in there and load up on your candy and then go to the movies. But it was fun, it was a big store, and as I said a lot of women went in there and bought.... Very nice glassware. Cause you'd go in there and you'd buy a butter dish or different things like that.

TA: Do you remember any of the people that worked there?

SK: No. I don't. No.

TA: Sometimes I guess when I compare Main Street to Coshocton, things like that, a lot of people tend to know the business owners. I didn't know if that was the case with this.

SK: Well Kresge's and Woolworths, were like franchises. They weren't local; I don't think they were locally-owned, per se. Um, you know like Heckler's Pharmacy was downtown and naturally we knew Mr. Heckler, but everybody called him "Heck." And he had a soda fountain in the drug store. You could go in and get phosphates or you know, milkshakes or chocolate sodas or whatever. Then they moved from around the square to Main Street and didn't have a soda fountain then. The Alcove was locally owned by the Serlas's. Ringwalt's was locally owned, Rudin's was locally owned. Woolson's was locally owned, it's still there. Worleys and La Masters. Everything was locally owned and oftentimes the business would be the family name on the sign.

TA: It's funny thinking about soda fountains being in the front of pharmacies.

SK: (*Laughs.*) I know. It's a little, um. But that was a big, in fact, there's a picture in that (*points to Images of America, Mount Vernon Ohio by Donald Edgar Boyd*) of Heckler's. It was called. Shoot, there's a picture I saw... There's the Vernon Theater. In fact, they did the premier of Bye-bye Birdie cause Paul Lynne, who was in the movie, grew up in Mount Vernon.

TA: Yeah they have so much about him at the Historical Society.

SK: Yeah they did, um, so they had one of the premiers here. There's Woolsons. Or course, its still here. Where is that picture? There it is, it's called Heckler's Coffee Club. But there's the counter in the pharmacy. A lot of men would get together and go down for coffee first thing in the morning. There. In fact, this man right here is Judge Aires (*spelling?*) His daughter is a friend of mine.

TA: Do you know the mayor?

SK: He was a judge, mhmm. This is a picture of 1960s parade in Mount Vernon. This is the Shlairit (*spelling?*) float, which my husband's mother was a Shlairit and they owned the trucking company here in Mount Vernon. In fact, that's my third grade teacher right there. In fact, these are all great pictures of Main Street. There's a Shlairit truck. And the parade, and then

TA: I may try to copy some of these if that would be possible.

SK: You can borrow it, would you like to borrow it?

TA: I would love to if that's alright.

SK: Absolutely. There's Pitkin's lunch counter; everybody had a lunch counter, you know. But you would go into here (*points*) and I remember as a kid, they would have these barrels and baskets of things and my mother used to say, cause she was born and raised here too, that you would go into Pitkin's and pick out a big pickle. Walk with the pickle uptown. Or a big hunk of cheese. They would slice off a big piece of cheese for you and you would walk out with it. It was a strange, I know. Um, where is.... I took the markers out of here, I shouldn't have done that. Um, there's a picture of my husband's family home. This is the E. A. Shlarit house, and it was on 101 W Sugar Street, it's no longer there it was torn down when they built the library, the new library. He was a trucking business in Mount Vernon for many years, for forty years.

TA: That is a beautiful home.

SK: Yeah it's a nice home, isn't it? Um, but there's a lot of wonderful pictures in here that, you know, look at. And if you want to come back and ask me any questions about them, I'd be more than happy to see what I can remember.

TA: Thank you. So, lunch counters, I feel like would be a great way to just congregate with people around town.

SK: Mhmm, you're right. They did. Not only people, you know, right now you see maybe people going to Tim Horton's or wherever in the morning and well it's the same type of thing but you know, everybody would go downtown. (8:50) If you worked downtown you work you before work or you would have your lunch there you would go to the counter at lunchtime. Kids, you know, would go to the lunch counter on Saturday mornings or Saturday afternoons. Um, Pitkin's Corner was a great, see they left town – Lizzie Pitkin and I were friends. They lived, I think Susan Ramser bought that house on

Gambier Street. It was, it was a great place to go. You'd walk in from the corner and there was saw dust on the floor and the smell of things cook of, or the smell of cheeses or whatever – but it was neat, it was a wonderful store.

TA: Was it all food at Pitkin's?

SK: Yes. Food and maybe a few kitchen-type items. That's what I can remember. I don't think they sold, unless it was kitchen gadgetry perhaps. Um, but I don't think they sold anything else beside produce and some canned goods but not a whole lot. I think it was mainly fresh produce or cheeses and nuts and some fruit, not much fruit though that I can remember but it was a great, great store. You could go down Main Street and get anything you wanted, is the thing. And it was nice because you went into different stores and would see different things. Not all stores would carry the same thing and they would do it on purpose, you know, so they wouldn't have to compete with one another. Um, so maybe some things they carried were just a little different. You could go to Zinc's who was famous for their produce so you'd always go to Zinc's for produce or you would go into a particular store if you loved the cheeses they carried. But you could walk up and down Main Street and at the end you would go home with everything you needed.

TA: What about comparing that to now? Do you think, what draws people to Main Street now?

SK: *(pause)* Um, not a whole lot. I hate to say that. I know Mount Vernon tries. Um, you have to, it's extremely difficult to compete with Wal-Marts and huge stores like that and what I always call a "wal-mart mentality." I know they've got a lovely bookstore downtown, Paragraphs is very nice, and they've got a lot of antique shops. Mount Vernon needs some more restaurants, good restaurants – not out on Coshocton but downtown. They need the Woodward Opera House to finish, to get finished, which would be a nice draw for Mount Vernon.

TA: When you were a kid, growing up in general, what was at the Woodward? Was it open?

SK: No. It was just closed. That's what I can remember, I don't even remember knowing about it when I was a kid. I would imagine it was either used for storage, whatever. It's a good thing it's still there. It's surprising it's still there. You know, but, a number of years ago people had the foresight to say this is a valuable part of history, of this area of the country, and they should try to kin it up and preserve it, it's very important. I think it's very slow in happening but I think it's important that it get finished.

TA: Comparing your growing up kind of around Main Street and going to Pitkin's Corner, Heckler's – do you think that kids spend time on Main Street now?

SK: I think the time they spend on Main Street is not good time. I don't think the kids, just my opinion, I don't think the kids around here have enough to do. When I was growing up there were dances every Friday and Saturday night and in Junior High there was a place in the old YMCA and it was called Keynote. And we went there every Friday night for dances and it was great. It was absolutely wonderful. And then when I was in high school there was a place called the Sugar Shack. And, you know where Southside

diner is? Okay well it was in the basement of there, of that place. And, of course that was a fire trap really, it was – all the kids in high school went there and they'd have bands, dances, it was, you know – this is what kids did then. Dancing between watching American Band Stand on TV and then having the dances in your hometown, that's what kids did and actually, of course, there was always maybe an element that would come and cause a problem, a fight or something like that but most of the time, no. It was, uh, fun. (15:00)

TA: So that part of South Main, with like Southside, was that considered part of Main Street then? Did people spend time over there as well?

SK: It's kind of off Main Street a little bit. When I was growing up, you know, kids as I said would go downtown and walk Main Street, stop and get candy or go to the movies or they would spend more time downtown. Cause there wasn't anything on Coshocton Avenue to, there weren't fast food places there were lunch counters and you'd go to the doughnut roll and get a doughnut and cherry coke, or you would go to the Alcove and go there cause, you know, something to eat or drink or something. Kids would spend more time downtown cause that was the only place to go. But it was, to me, it was a lot – you didn't have to go, get in your car. Unless you wanted to go to Becks and cruise, you didn't have to go in your car to do anything. You could be dropped off. And this is what parents did, they dropped off their kids downtown, you know, if they would get in trouble then they would have to go home. But there was Jody's to go to, you know, as I said the movies to go to, you know, there was just a lot to do. You didn't have to be in a car to drive from one end of Coshocton Avenue to the other.

TA: Can you talk a little bit more about cruising? Like who was doing it?

SK: Cruising (*laughs*). High school kids. You would get in your cars, and you would drive around the Square then you'd go down Main Street, go right down to Beck's, either drive through Beck's because it was a drive-in restaurant, it was a long, kind of narrow, and you'd park your cars in front and then on the other side you'd park your cars over here and there was an aisle, you know like a thru-way through Beck's so you could go out Newark Road and go through Martinsburg Road and then go back into town.

TA: Just driving?

SK: Just driving. And then, yelling at each other out the car and stopping at a stoplight. And especially the girls, the guys wouldn't do this they'd kind of look at us like we were nuts. But you know you'd get out and do a Chinese Fire Drill and run around the car and stuff but it was a way to be seen and it was fun.

TA: So if you wanted to be seen you would be on Main Street?

SK: Mhmm.

TA: I feel like that's totally not the case anymore.

SK: Oh it's not. It is sad. It's very sad. And it's not just Mount Vernon. It's many, many small towns that have lost their identity as a small town because of all of this outskirts

stuff. You know, Coshocton Road and all of this other stuff that take people out of downtown. And I think it's very sad and it's almost like you need to have some sort of gimmick to bring people back down and it's just the right, you have to find the right thing to draw people. That's why I keep thinking the Woodward would be absolutely wonderful. If it was done and then we had one or two more really great, good restaurants downtown. That could draw people also. Cause we've got to really great colleges, you know, in the area and you have the population during the year so you know, I just would like to see Mount Vernon thrive again and I'd like to see the downtown thrive again.

TA: Speaking of little gimmick things, do you ever go to First Friday things or other festivals?

SK: Mhmm. *(Pause)* They try. I think the Farmers' Market is good. You know, that's great in spring and summer and early fall. But once one o'clock rolls around the downtown looks like it's empty again. Um, so to have something continue down there... First Fridays are nice, some are better than others. It depends on maybe what time of year it is or whatever, and what things they have downtown. Uh, the Dan Emmett festival is, used to be better than it is now in my opinion, but it still is a good idea. I just think we used to have better vendors here. But, you know, it's still nice having the concert downtown where they try to bring back big bands of the sixties or bands that imitate other bands. It's a great idea, it's a great thing to have.

TA: So do you think that Main Street still serves an important roll in the community or do you think it's overlooked or...?

SK: I think that probably with the majority of people who live in Knox County it's overlooked. I think that people who truly love this town, that were born here, raised here, as generations past have been here, had a great fondness for the downtown. But realistically, it's not the same place, I don't think it ever will be the same place. It has to be reinvented. You know, which is hard to do. You've got a lot of people with a lot of ideas but to implement those ideas it's difficult. And, um, it's sad.

TA: I think that compared to other cities it has maintained a little bit more character than some.

SK: Well, perhaps. Um, you know some of the towns that, smaller towns that I've driven through, you know Wooster or Granville, for instance as a village is darling but it's got some lovely shops, that's what we don't have. Mount Vernon used to have really nice shops. There was a store in Mount Vernon called Galcenlighters *(spelling)* and it sits where Pitkin's Corner used to be. It was an amazing store. It sold china, you know, all the brides would go in there and they would have the bridal registry and everything. They sold good china and everyday, furniture. Third floor was furniture and it was beautiful. First floor, downstairs, was an interior design place. They sold Pittsburg paint, and they had a designer down there Charlie Tinkem *(spelling)*, who would come to your home and they sold drapery fabrics, everything. Um, then it disappeared. It sold high-end things and it disappeared because I guess, there were too many people that didn't want to buy that way anymore. And also that another thing for Mount Vernon is that we sit close to a

large city. It only take us forty minutes to get to Polaris. Downtown isn't that much further. And in some respects that's very good but in other respects, that's bad. So.

TA: People take their money elsewhere?

SK: Yeah. And I must admit that we go to Columbus a lot. Because it's not that far away and there's a lot more to do. So, I just think times change. And it's hard for small towns to compete in the same way they used to. They can't do that. Realistically, they can't. So as I said they have to reinvent themselves and do something else. So they're trying and I think the antique stores and you know other things like that, you know, need to do a few more things maybe too. And I don't necessarily know exactly what would be the best thing but it could happen you know, keep your fingers crossed.

TA: Okay. Well, I'm going to go through this book (*Images of America Mount Vernon, Ohio*) and if I have other questions...

SK: I'd be more than happy to answer them.

TA: I'm sorry about the mix-up with the tape recorder. Thank you so much.

SK: You don't have *anything else* you want to ask me? I know, I know – I can go on and on sometimes. This sounds like a wonderful project.