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Interview with sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Karen Seward

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Karen Seward

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Researcher's name: Anne Crosby

Event: Interview with sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Karen Seward

Place: Mount Vernon Middle School

Co-workers present: N/A

This is an interview with Mrs. Seward, a sixth grade teacher at Mount Vernon Middle School. The interview is on November 2, 1999 at 10:30 in the morning. And this is Anne Crosby interviewing her. Thank you.

AC: I hope the tape recorder doesn't bother you.

KS: No, it's fine.

AC: How long have you taught at Mt. Vernon Middle School?

KS: This is my fifth year.

AC: And do you teach science or...?

KS: I teach science to 55 sixth graders. And we work in teams and I teach science to our entire team.

Ac: And, If this is your fifth year, did you work somewhere else before this?

KS: I was a learning disabilities tutor, before that I was a substitute teacher, before that I worked in sporting goods.

AC: Oh wow, haha. Do you live in Knox County?

KS: Yes, I do. In fact I was born in Knox County.

AC: Oh really, where about have you lived in Knox County?

KS: I've lived in Mt. Vernon al my life.

AC: Okay, why did you teach, did you say fifth grade, or I thought it was sixth grade?

KS: Sixth grade.

AC: Okay sixth grade.

LAK-AC-A110299.A

KS: One of the reasons was that's where the opening were at the time when I was looking for a job and I was a little hesitant at first because I wasn't sure that this was the age level I would most prefer, but now that I've been doing it, I would not want to be any place else. I enjoy this age. And all it's challenges. And rewards.

AC: And what are some of the challenges of sixth graders?

KS: Sixth graders are changing so quickly. They're dealing with a lot of social issues in fact for a lot of them the social concerns overwhelm any academics. They're trying to find out who they are they're learning to become a little more independent from mom and dad, they're coming from an elementary situation, where they've been, well they're still for lack of a better word, mothered and kind of ushered along to sixth grade where part of our responsibility is to help them become more independent and responsible for their won work.

AC: So is sixth grade the youngest they have at Mount Vernon Middle School?

KS: Yes, it's a transition year and that's part of the purpose of sixth grade, to help them make that transition from elementary and the way that's structured to junior high age and the way that's structured.

AC: When I went to middle school we had fifth through eighth, but I think that was too big a gap, and I was a little too young for me.

KS: I imagine. From sixth grade to eighth is quite a stretch and some people are very concerned about their children coming to the middle school with those seventh and eighth grade ages, but we keep them pretty much self-contained in this hall way and the hall way upstairs and it's worked well.

AC: That's nice. How did you originally become interested in bringing the Kokosing River into your curriculum?

KS: (pause) I believe it was two years ago, I'm not sure what led me to think of it but probably because of our close proximity to the river and it's, we're within walking distance. And I thought about doing a study where the students would learn about the history about the river, the uses, what the river has been used for, it's influence, how it impacts people living in Knox county now, those kinds of things. And then some kinds of things about plants and animals connected with the river, that kind of thing and last summer, summer of 98, I took a project wet workshop, and we did river monitoring activity and it was the first time I had done that. And it was so exciting because you think of the obvious things of in a river, crawdads, crawfish, I should call them crayfish, the things that are so evident but as we found all these other critters in there it was exciting to think that there were that many things that you don't realize are there. And I thought if I can get this excited about this, it has to be exciting for my kids plus the fact that I thought they should know what things are there.

AC: And how have you felt kids have responded to the project?

LAK-AC-A110299.A

KS: It's been great. They in fact, we've done it, this is the third time we've taken the kids to do river monitoring and this was by far the best group I think. They really were enthused about it, they got right into it, and as they started to find those things, some of them were a little, oh this was no big deal, or I don't know if I really want to do this, but as they started to find those things on the net and put them in the water, a container of water to look at them, they got a lot more excited about it, talking about the characteristics talking about those organisms were interacting with each other in that container and it was exciting to see them get excited.

AC: And do you think the information they're learning about these critters that are going around, does that give them a different relationship with the river and those critters or is it purely science related?

KS: I think it gives them a different relationship because a lot of these kids have grown up near the river and some of these kids kind of hang out down around the river sometimes. And I think when they realize there's more there than they've realized, gives them a little different appreciation for when they're disturbing the river bottom and they're moving rocks and things and you know when they're just playing around in the water.

AC: Do you think the community that lives near the river has a relationship with it, is everyone aware that like Knox county has this amazing scenic river, or ...?

KS: I think a lot of people who live here take it for granted because it's always been here, it's just there. I think some people don't appreciate the fact of how clean it is and how, the big evidence of how clean it is all the life that is there. And the kids were impressed with that because when I had them write responses to our trip, a lot of them mentioned it being so clean, that lots of things can live there. Over and over again, they mentioned the cleanliness and the life that's there. So I think it impressed them in that sense, but I think a lot of people are not aware of what's there. They just think of the water, they don't think of all the eco-system that's involved.

AC: Is your hope in bringing sixth graders into it to raise any community awareness or just to raise these kids awareness?

KS: I think probably to raise some community awareness because as they go home and share what they've seen that I think is going to make an impact on their families, on siblings, as they talk with other kids at school about, you know we went on a field trip this is what we saw. I think that gets the message out and spreads the word. And I know in fact I know I talked with some of the other teachers about my experience doing the river monitoring and Deb Viglo with Soil and Water Conservation office has worked with several classes now who are doing the same thing.

AC: Oh, really.

KS: They're not involved on the state level, they have contacted with them about doing a official

LAK-AC-A110299.A

river monitoring, but they do take their students down there and they do some activities at the river.

AC: Is that in this school, or in other schools?

KS: In this school.

AC: Oh wow.

KS: And then the high school has a pretty extensive river study.

AC: Oh it does.

KS: Mr. Cunningham was instrumental in setting that up over there, and in fact my son is in his biology class this year. And it's interesting that Andrew is doing a little more advanced things with the river than we are.

(Beeping for end of class period comes on the overhead speaker and then music plays for a few minutes of passing period)

AC: What about the project do you think your students like about it?

KS: One thing they really liked was being in the water. But I think once they get there they start seeing things. We had a lot of kids who were inquisitive, so I think they enjoyed finding out about this.

(Announcement on the speaker)

AC: And this is a general question, what do you think about when I say the Kokosing River?

KS: Well, probably before the last two or three years I would probably take it for granted also, but as I make preparations to with my materials for my kids to do group work with the different aspects of the Kokosing, I went to the resource room at the library and went back in some of the old files and the old books and things and finding out the history was really exciting. I found out things that the Kokosing has been used for that I hadn't thought about. I also, as I found out more about what life is there, it gave me a better appreciation for what a resource it is and what a why we need to value it because a lot of places it's not like that.

AC: What are the different things that you found in history that the river was used for?

KS: There were many, many mills, along the Kokosing and it's branches, I never thought about there being so many of those. There was information about the first, I believe it was the first white woman to come here by, I think she came here by canoe and that kind of thing, coming up the Kokosing, just those things that I hadn't thought about before. There were some other businesses, and factories and things that were involved in the river and the shipping how

LAK-AC-A110299.A

important it was, one of the reasons Mt. Vernon grew like it did was because of our access to ship things on down to Walhony (???), to Muskingum, to the Ohio.

AC: And how do you teach your kids about this history of the river. What kind of background do they have before they set foot...?

KS: I didn't cover the historical, too much of the historical aspects this year but before we go to the river we divide into groups and they take topics and they explore these topics. Some of the topics we have this year were plants of the river, animals that live in the river, animals near the river, water, where our water comes from. I wanted them to look learn that we don't get out water from the river, we get it from wells. Also, what happens to our waste water, and that group. One group went to the water treatment plant and the other went to the waste water treatment plant and they learned how the water is treated and they also saw where it was emptied into the Kokosing again and what happens to it before that happens. That made an impression on them and they shared that with the other kids. We had , let me see we had a couple of groups talking about the water shed, what area this covers. And another group explored a little bit about the history the river in the sense that what it's names were before. (The music has now shut off) It's course and things were influenced by the glaciers. And those kinds of things.

AC: Did these different groups have to do their own research?

KS: They did their own research using materials that I've gathered. Because for these kids to just have this big topic and strike out to find it they're not that advanced in their research skills. So, I have put together information that they can search through.

AC: And the kids who looked at the water treatment, was that a school field trip that they went on?

KS: I didn't try to take the whole all 55 of the students, so the groups who were learning about that, I took. So it was just groups of 5 students I think.

AC: Okay

KS: But then they came back and reported to the whole group and from what they told the group I could tell it made an impression on them, that they learned a lot, and I learned loads of things because I had never done that before.

AC: Do you think you would ever incorporate taking all of them there. (KS nods) Yes?

KS: Yes, since I hadn't been there before I wasn't real sure how it would work. With 30 students I could see it being manageable. But with two classes together I thought, I don't know if they can handle 55...

But I think next year I might find out if they could. Maybe divide them into small groups when they get there or something. Because by next year the new water treatment plant will be open.

LAK-AC-A110299.A

AC: What is...

KS: And it's on the West side of Mt. Vernon, of course which will be larger than what they have now and more up to date. So I think that will be interesting for them to see and the waste water plant was an interesting trip because the kids learned and I'm sure they didn't know and I'm not sure that I knew, but I may have, that it's treated with bacteria.

AC: Oh, okay.

KS: That's one of the ways they treat the water.

AC: Is the reasoning for a new water plant is to make it more modern?

KS: Part of it is to make it more modern and part of it I think is just because they need more state of the art facilities. Because they're water treatment plant they have now I believe was built in the 1920's or 30's. So it's extremely old.

AC: Oh, okay. Now, Are you aware of the issues in the greater community with Delco pumping out.

KS: Oh, yes.

AC: And how do you feel about that? As just a community member?

KS: As a community member, I guess I feel that I'm not sure that it's a good idea that they're taking water from our aquifer, and I have trouble understanding how it would not have an impact. At some point in time, because they're demands are going to increase, and it doesn't seem to me that it can meet all the demands for an unlimited amount of time.

AC: Well, I think it's probably effecting things now even. With that much water...

KS: Well I'm concerned with that and while I can understand their problems and the problems on beyond us, but I also think it's not necessarily our job to take care of that responsibility.

AC: Do you feel community members are for the most part aware of this and concerned about it?

KS: I doubt it. I would imagine, unless people are directly effected or think they will be directly effected they're no as aware of it.. It's something I tried make my kids aware of (phone starts to ring), by mentioning it to them and telling them that they are the people who will have to deal with these kinds of issues. Excuse me. (She answers the phone to talk with another teacher)

KS: I think it's important. I try to help the kids look ahead a little bit and help them understand that they're going to be making decisions as adults and they're not that far away from being adults and that things that they learn here can help them with those decisions.

LAK-AC-A110299.A

AC: So you do talk about that sort, those sort of issues int talking about the river?

KS: Right.

AC: (pause) Is there anything else that you talk about with the kids concerning the river that I have missed or that we haven't touched upon?

KS: (pause) Well we talk of course about the environmental issues as far as pollution and what kinds of things we're putting in the river I do get the "Enviroscape" and show them about the runoff, we talked about the runoff. We talked about the developed area on Coshocton Avenue which all that runoff which goes to the run, that kind of thing. And in fact we did drawings of developed land. (She shows me them hanging on the wall.)

AC: Oh, okay.

KS: And then we symbolically took buckets of water and we had different materials symbolizing pollution and they were to talk about what pollution their developed area was contributing to the river. Because I wanted them to understand that every thing we do effects the river. And for some of them that was a real eye-opener. They didn't realize that.

AC: do you think they take this information with them and try and change their personal behavior in any way?

KS: I think some of them do, especially if they're from families that tend to be conscious of that kind of thing. Others, hopefully if they don't do it consciously, it will be lurking in their subconscious and at some point in time, they'll be thinking about what's out there.

AC: Do any of your students come from farm families?

KS: Yes.

AC: And do you think their relationship with the river is any different? Just being in touch with the environment and how you use it?

KS: I think sometimes it is, I think some of them, one of the students in particular comes to mind. They have a big beef farm and they're near the Kokosing and I'm sure they are people who are careful about controlling run off in their land and that sort of thing. Because I perceive them as people who are environmentally conscious and concerned. That is one that just comes to mind. It seems to me that a lot of people who live in the rural area of Mt. Vernon, or of Knox County are pretty cognizant of the river and it's influence on them.

AC: And how do you feel the parents have reacted to your project?

KS: Real Positively. I've gotten a lot of good comments from parents. I think they like the aspect of the kids being involved in a service kind of thing, doing the river monitoring, and I

LAK-AC-A110299.A

think they probably like the fact that the kids are more aware of what's in the river.

AC: Now, river monitoring. I'm not very into science. What exactly is involved in river monitoring?

KS: The river monitoring that they do, there are several kinds of river monitoring. We're going to do a little of the chemical monitoring in the spring. Mr. Cunningham does a little more of that at the high school. But what we do is, is part of the Ohio Scenic River Monitoring Project, I think is what it's called and that's where we use a net to catch macro invertebrates which are things like snails, waterpennies, crawfish, leeches, catasly larva, all these things living in the river. And then we classify, identify them and classify them and record the results on a chart. And there are three groups of taxa, and those, each group represents a water quality. Group 3 are macro invertebrates that can live in almost any water condition. Group 2 need cleaner water and Group 1 can not survive in polluted water at all. And then they have a code a way that this is multiplied to give a cumulative index number and then that index number indicated the quality of the water. And they use volunteers from all over the state to do that monitoring. And I fill out a report and mail it in to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Scenic Rivers Program.

AC: So, that's based on the research your students are doing?

KS: We learn about the macro invertebrates we've learned the characteristics and those kinds of things. And then the students learn that these different creatures live in different kinds of water.

AC: So, have you found that, was it the macro-invertebrates that need the cleanest water.

KS: WE found a good number of the group 1 that need the cleanest water and that's been true every time we go. We've found some of the group 3, some leeches. The kids always want to find leeches because they think that so gross. But then we find a lot of the group 1. I just want to find the group I get from the state, to show you what it is. (She is walking around the room at this point.)

Pause

I've started to put that river stuff away because We've moved into erosion.

pause

This is a copy of the form that we fill out to send into the state and that shows the different taxa that we're looking for.

AC: So, did you just send one of these forms to the state yourself?

KS: I compile the information and send that to the state. (Hands me another sheet of paper) There's a few of the critters in the different...

LAK-AC-A110299.A

AC: Okay, and does Mr. Cunningham do a similar thing?

KS: I believe he does, I'm not sure how extensive his is, but I know he is the kind of person who set up the river study at the high school. And as I said it's more extensive than what we do.

AC: Do you think he would be willing to talk to us?

KS: I think so.

AC: Okay.

(She's walking around and looking for something else.)

KS: okay, here's what I'm looking for. We were really excited to see our names in this book. It's the annual report of the stream quality monitoring project and I assume they have a copy of this someplace at the Rural Life Center. Because it lists all the people that are involved in the river monitoring, as of the printing date of that thing. And it tells the river quality for the time period that the report covers.

AC: Were you students aware that they were mentioned here? Were they excited about that?

KS: Un huh.

AC: And do you feel the state does pay enough attention to the river?

KS: From my observation, it seems to me that they do. But I don't know for sure. Because I'm not actually in contact with how many times they're checking and that kind of thing. The fact that they did go ahead and approve this scenic river application and that kind of thing, it seems that they're paying some attention to it.

AC: And do you hope to continue with your study?

KS: yes I hope to continue with it and I'm already thinking ahead to next year to what we can do to make it better than what it was this year.

AC: And what kinds of things would that be?

KS: Well, one will be trying to take larger numbers of student to the water treatment plant and the wastewater treatment plant because I think it's important for the kids to see where the water comes from, what happens to it, what happens to it before they use it and what has to be done with it after they use it. And deciding how to what areas to cover learning about the Kokosing, how much history, and that kind of thing. I'm just...the actual monitoring when we went there went really well, so I think we have that under control. Deciding exactly what to do preliminary to going...I look at and revise.

AC: And the way I heard about your project was from the newspaper and were you, did they

LAK-AC-A110299.A

come and interview you, or...?

KS: When my team teacher and I, Susan Rice and I were doing this, she had mentioned that we should call the newspaper, and last year I didn't get it done, so this fall I made a point to call and it just so happened that when I called and talked to the education reporter she was getting ready to do a piece on the environment, so she was really excited that someone would just fall into her lap. So when she came out, I thought we would be talking about a picture with a caption, so I was very surprised to open the paper and see there was a whole article.

AC: And were there photographers and on the field visit on the river with you?

KS: She just took her own pictures and she interviewed me at the river.

AC: Okay, and how do you think your kids responded to being in the newspaper?

KS: Oh, they were excited, especially the ones who were quoted and Tyler, in fact the clipping on the chalk board is one that Tyler brought in because he was quoted in there. So they were excited. Most of the response you get at this age though is that everybody couldn't be in the picture. But they handled it pretty well, we didn't have anybody that complained too much. It was a very nice article and I was glad the kids got the exposure.

AC: And how have you felt, have you heard anything from the community, other than the Rural Life Center, picking up on your article? Have you heard...

KS: A lot of people have noticed it and mentioned it to me. And the good thing about that is a lot of people then have read it and have found out about it and some people will say, "well what did you do there?" So it helped spread the word that way.

AC: That's good. And what we've been noticing, we've been reading *The Mt. Vernon News*

(End of side A)

AC: So, what I was saying is that the newspaper seems to focus a lot on the youth in the community, do you think this is beneficial to the youth, have they noticed that themselves?

KS: I'm not sure of how much they are aware of that they are.

AC: They are (simultaneously)

KS: Now we do have a lot of students that are in sports and I think they recognize their sports being included in that, as far as other things being included I'm not sure that they're that aware, especially at this age, now seventh and eighth grade might be a little more aware of that.

AC: Do you feel the community is aware that they focus a lot on the youth or is that a value they have, in the overall community?

LAK-AC-A110299.A

KS: I'm not sure that they realize they realize that they focus that much on the youth, and well I guess a lot of time maybe the youth don't realize it either, because often the youth seem to feel they are overlooked or that everything is for the adults, so that's, ... In fact I'm not sure I realized that information youth got that much exposure. But that's a good thing.

AC: So, you don't, I mean maybe that was a false observation by us? That the youth are focused on.

KS: I don't know, if you're really monitoring, if you're really looking at it. You might have a more accurate perception. Whereas sometimes the perception of the community, especially they youth in the community is that everything around here is for old people, so I'm not sure they perceived that yes, they are getting this recognition through the newspaper.

AC: I don't know that I have that much else to ask. Was there anything else that I skipped over that you can think of?

KS: Not that I can think of, you covered things very thoroughly and you had a lot of good questions.

AC: Do you think it might be beneficial to talk to some of the students who went into the river? Do you think they would be willing to talk?

KS: I would think so.

AC: Okay, could we use you as a contact if we decided to do that.

KS: Sure, sure.

AC: Maybe you could suggest different students, that would be...

KS: Certainly, I'd be glad to. In fact, one comes to my mind right now. So, sure I'd be glad to.

AC: Thanks very much, and could the Rural Life Center then keep in touch with you throughout the year?

KS: Sure, I'd be glad to have that contact. Thank you.

AC: In our project we're still in the very preliminary stages of it, as I told you before. We really want to make it not that we're just looking at the community, but that we're giving something back to the community. And so that they understand our project, whatever it ends up being and that it really benefits them. Do you have any, like ideas of where you would like to see The Rural Life Center take this project?

KS: I was afraid that was what you were going to ask.

LAK-AC-I110299.A

AC: If you don't have an answer ...

KS: And no, right? Just off the top of my head I don't. But I think a lot of it has, a big part of it will be obviously educating people. And I know there's probably a large segment of the population that needs to be educated about just how they're way of life, or their everyday actions influence the river. AS well as what this river offers. I don't think people understand the benefits.

AC: Okay, okay, I think that's it.