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To This Day!: A Brief Oral History of the Life of Clara Wallock

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I met Clara Wallock\(^1\) in late February 2007 at the Eastern Star nursing home in Mount Vernon, Ohio, where her husband Thomas was recovering from surgery for an intestinal blockage. As part of a project for an anthropology course in oral and life history at Kenyon College, we students were supposed to pair with Eastern Star residents and collect their life stories over a month or so of interviews. But I had been struggling to find residents that were lucid and open enough to be willing to allow me, a very young woman and a stranger, to record their life histories.

My first meetings with Thomas and Clara were only slightly better, but Clara captured my attention. Clara vowed not to talk because of a tendency to “talk too much” (or something to that effect), yet she frequently jumped into the conversation and filled her husband’s gaps with detail and clarity. And Thomas needed help filling the gaps: he often repeated the same stories, had a hard time remembering details and did not seem predisposed to self-reflection.

“He has dementia, as you can probably tell,” Clara said after Thomas was taken to dinner one day. I was taken aback: not having experience with dementia, I had thought Thomas’ stories were the repetitive stories of an old man, not signs of mental decline. I decided to ask Clara if she would be willing to help me with my project, both because

\(^1\) All names have been changed at “Clara’s” request.
interviewing Thomas clearly was not going to work and because Clara’s sharp-mindedness and recall for detail were astonishing.

Clara agreed to help me one day in late March, and we agreed to start interview the following week and to “see how it goes.” She expressed a desire to help me with my project and doubt that her life was interesting enough to merit interviews. But as with the revelation of Thomas’ dementia, hidden in plain sight because of my lack of knowledge, I found that Clara’s life contained surprises and contradictions both delightful and sobering, which made our interviews and this analysis a fascinating project. I feel privileged that Clara has shared her life with me, and I hope I am fair in its analysis.

**Background**

Clara is 78 and was born Clara Mehlinger in 1929 in Guntersplum, Germany, the second of the eventual five children of Gunter and Frieda Mehlinger, a Jewish father and a Protestant mother. As persecution of Jews intensified under Nazi rule, the family sought to leave Germany in 1933 and again five years later, finally securing passage on the American steamer *New York, New York* in November 1938, which was according to Clara one of the last passenger ships to depart Germany for several years. After passing through Ellis Island, the Mehlingers came straight to Mount Vernon, Ohio, where one of Gunter’s brothers worked as an engineer and helped the family get settled. All but one of the five Mehlinger children still live in central Ohio (Clara’s older sister lives in California), and Clara describes a “good” relationship with her siblings.

Clara has lived in Mount Vernon continuously since 1938, graduating 1948 from Mount Vernon High School and marrying Thomas Wallock in 1949 after he returned from military service. Clara identified as a “Jewish girl” while growing up, but the
decline of the Mount Vernon Jewish community and her marriage to Thomas led her to eventually convert to Christianity. Clara attended a business college in Mount Vernon and worked at several secretarial positions before becoming a stay-at-home mother upon the 1953 birth of her son Michael. Clara’s daughters Lori and Jane were born in 1958 and 1964.

Clara greatly enjoyed her 20 years as a stay-at-home mother and was involved in her children’s schools, a sorority and various mother’s groups while Thomas worked as a Mount Vernon police officer and other side jobs as a security officer to add to the family’s income. All three children were involved in activities such as Girl Scouts and youth groups, and all three went to college and earned master’s degrees, of which Clara is very proud. Clara went back to work in 1973 as a bookkeeper at the Knox Community Hospital. Though we did not greatly cover the 1980s and 1990s in our interviews, Thomas and Clara sold their longtime home in Mount Vernon and moved to a condo in a new development in 1998.

Thomas’ health began failing in 1999, and in January 2007 Thomas was admitted to Eastern Star after surgery for a blocked intestine. Because he has dementia and because Clara is not strong enough to care for him anymore, it now looks as if he will be living permanently at Eastern Star, with Clara living alone in their condo. Clara is very worried about Thomas and is trying to adjust to the changes of living apart from her husband of 58 years. Clara’s activities consist of visiting Thomas daily, visiting with children and grandchildren, attending church and lunching with friends, among other things.
Clara as a Narrator

Clara is a lively narrator, dotting her reminiscences with laughter, irony, digressions, and humorous and suspenseful stories that provide detailed historical and personal information. While my seven hours of interviews with Clara were focused on eliciting facts and her thoughts about her life, I found upon review of the transcript that the unique style of Clara’s narration and its features were important keys to understanding her stories, her personality and thus her life.

Instructs and educates about the past

Clara sees her primary role in our interviews as that of a teacher or a conveyor of information about the past. In almost every narrative, Clara points out the differences between the present day and her childhood or even middle age. When describing her belief in Santa Claus at age six or seven, she abruptly interjects:

“When you’re six or seven—now children are too mature to believe in Santa that long, but in those days—I know my oldest granddaughter it was getting embarrassing, and I always said I think she’s doing it for her mother’s sake ... [continues with story] I brought that up to my mother years later...”

While sometimes Clara illustrates what she sees as neutral differences between the past and the present, she often finds that things have changed negatively over time, such as when she describes the changing economy in Mount Vernon:

“—and there was Pittsburgh Plate, which was a big employer, and they had hired a lot of Belgian glassblowers. And they’re all gone! Now we have a bunch of little companies that hire 150 people and they think it’s big.”

And Clara’s examples of the past often serve to illustrate the different standards of living and levels of materialism that existed in her childhood and young womanhood and now:

“...and you know, even though we had a phone...you didn’t used to phone that often. Cause now you see people on the streets, restrooms, wherever, using cell phones.”
To further emphasize her role as teacher or instructor, Clara frequently says things like “It may be hard for someone in your generation to relate to that” if she thinks I am confused about what she is telling me. As we will see, increasing materialism and other structural changes in society strongly color Clara’s life experiences, and Clara dots her narrative with specific instructional asides in hopes that her listener (and now readers) will fully appreciate the scope of the changes she has seen in her lifetime.

**Importance of relating facts, dates and background information**

In narrating a new story, Clara frequently gives a short opening and then interrupts herself by providing detailed background and historical information, only returning after a while to her subject. At first this style of narration confused me, because I thought Clara was not responding to my questions:

"But the synagogue, which really had a lot of good memories for me, had been turned into a brewery. And that really hurt. [background information] But after we left the town we were in, or even before—we’re going back 60 plus years—the Nazis had basically boarded up the front door of the synagogue and the Jews weren’t supposed to use it any longer. But what—the faithful Jews are faithful to their religion, so what they did was—not in bunches, they had to spread it out so no one would suspect somebody, they would come on the pretense of visiting my family, but after they got into the main hallway there was a back door to the back courtyard, and the men had made a new door to the back courtyard that was not visible to the street anywhere [pause]. The men, usually, would come and they’d go ahead and have their Friday evening—sometime I think they’d get it on different nights just to throw off of anybody was observing them. But I walked into that building that had, and in those days there was a balcony where the women and children sat upstairs and the men downstairs, well the balcony was still there and I remembered where the [covenant?] was where the Torah was kept and all the elements. [back to point] Course that was no longer gone but to think that anybody regardless what religion would convert a religious building into a brewery. That just really bothered me."

Only by giving the background information about how her family was involved in concealing her childhood synagogue from the Nazis does Clara feel that I would understand the point of the story, which is how unsettling it was for her to find her old synagogue transformed into a brewery.
Dates, numbers, facts

These digressions, so important to understanding Clara as she wishes to be understood, are supported by Clara’s impressive ability to recall specific dates, numbers and facts: she remembers the exact date and day of the week of her arrival in the U.S., the exact difference between her and her older sister’s ages (two years and 12 days) and the years in which all of her siblings were born, among other things. In my time as a student journalist at Kenyon, I frequently interview people who cannot locate in time things that happened to them only months or weeks before, and Clara’s ability surprised me. Clara often goes to great lengths to present accurate information, frequently puzzling over the exact details of an event:

“Where my oldest sister, she was kind of a self-centered personality, and she was also quite a social butterfly. During the war Kenyon was an Air Force base, and very conveniently—there was a bus line that ran from Gambier to Mount Vernon, and one of the bus stops would you believe—to this day when I look at that corner it seems like such an inappropriate place for a bus stop, I don’t know if my sister had something to do with it or not, but one of the bus stops was right by the corner of our house. And she really got acquainted with a lot of those [soldiers]!”

Clara finds this information extremely important to describing events in her life, probably both because she sees herself as instructing me on accurate history and because she places value on remembering when events occurred. Interestingly, this focus of Clara’s is more in line with typical Western men’s narratives, which are often “concerned with objective states (facts, dates, chronologies) over the expression of feelings ... Men are more likely to be expository and to write about external things” (Ray 1999). This supposedly “masculine” prominence of historical detail and background information, and the effort Clara expends in expressing it accurately, shows that Clara seems concerned with giving an account of her life in which details are accurate and historical context is understood.
Uses ironic, humorous, suspenseful stories to illustrate points

Clara’s digressions often take the form of humorous, ironic or suspenseful stories that include the above-mentioned facts and her own instructor’s tone. However, stories must be rehearsed to achieve the proper humorous or suspenseful note, and I often felt that Clara had told many of her stories before, such as one about her youngest daughter falling out of her high chair:

“I turned my back to her to do something at the sink and when I turned around there she was standing up in her high chair. And I knew if I would dash for her she would probably jump out or ... And I just got into fingertip length to that child, and to this day I don’t how she did it, and she flipped herself backwards, out of the high chair, plopped on the floor. I picked her up and she went limp on me. Well I thought she had killed herself. I kept hollerin’ ‘Jane! Jane!’ you know I thought if I hollered long enough she’d look up at me say ‘what, mommy?’ [laughs] ... and we got to the emergency room and again we had to wait and wait. And again it was the family doctor, aaaaaand when he got to us by then she was running all over the place [laughs]. So ‘mother I don’t think we have anything to worry about, but just to give you peace of mind we’ll do an X-ray.’ Well he was just floored when he came out, he said ‘She actually has a hairline fracture.’”

Though this rehearsed quality may make such stories seem “canned” or less authentic, this story uses irony, suspense and humor to convey a memory, which makes Clara much more fun to listen and talk to. Aside from these three narrative qualities, Clara’s stories have three other prominent motifs that are used to convey meaning.

• Physical appearance as a symbol

Clara frequently describes the physical appearance of people and objects as indicators of underlying meaning, such as when she describes what she perceives as favoritism in her family:

“I had [a younger] brother and an older sister that seemed to be idolized by all the adults in the family because they were curly-headed blonds and I was coal-black hair, straight as a poker. And I remember as a child when we had visitors they’d all fuss over the tousle-headed blonds, and it just seemed like they didn’t even know I was there.”
The physical appearance of the children serves as a cause and a metaphor for abstract and hard-to-grasp family dynamics. Poor physical appearance is also used as a metaphor for neglect and perhaps moral decay:

“She expresses disapproval when describing her mother’s unhelpfulness after her son was born:

“I was so disappointed in my mother. She was so busy making sure her house was spick and span in case one of her friends came here to see the new baby, and I kept hoping she would come in there to my rescue my screaming child.”

In these ways, Clara frequently describes the physical appearance of people—or vain preoccupation with such—as symbolic of the cause or outcome of decisions made in the context of family relationships. Clara thus presents families as tightly interwoven units in which choices good and bad have real effects on other family members.

- **Significance of turning points**

Clara frequently describes single events or “turning points” that fundamentally alter people’s lives or perceptions of others, usually negatively. Both she and Thomas underwent such experiences, Clara with her grandfather when he, playing St. Nicholas, gave her coal for Christmas:

“And to this day—I really didn’t like the man. I didn’t like him before and that just kind of sealed it.”

And Thomas when he was beaten by his father for a childhood transgression:

“And you know beatings was an accepted discipline at that time. But I think really from that day on he just never felt towards his dad the same way.”

The regularity of such events in Clara’s narrative suggests that she sees certain
events as permanently life-affecting or altering, which perhaps supports her dedication to raising her children well and abstaining from criticism of others. These motifs and narrative elements all contribute to the intricacy and significance of Clara's stories and show in some ways how her very values and beliefs are woven into her personal style of storytelling.

Admits lack of knowledge/confusion over past events

At the same time, Clara does not cast herself as a completely infallible narrator and frequently admits her own lack of memory, confusion or uncertainty about past events. Sometimes, it seems Clara simply does not have the information I request, such as when I asked why her younger brothers decided to join the military:

"At that time I had been out of the house for a number of years ... I know they enlisted. I don't know whether my par—my father might have encouraged it. I wasn't there to hear some of the conversations."

At other times, Clara had been present for the event she relates but cannot remember the circumstances, such as her children's relationships with each other growing up:

"And I don't recall them arguing all that much but my middle child tells me 'Mother, you've forgotten a lot.' [laughter] 'Well, okay, that's all right too!'"

Admits but does not dwell

While Clara admits her lack of knowledge and some of her own mistakes, she does not usually dwell on it but moves to other parts of her story, such as when she describes her sorority:

"We always had one business meeting and one social. And a lot of sororities, they have a very active—[pause] oh shoot, it's a national...oh well, anyhow. They have a lot of chapters locally...[continues]"

And Clara frequently backs off or offers qualifying statements on confusing or touchy subjects, such as "I don't know" or "Maybe that's just me" when talking about her
dissatisfaction with the “morals of today.” In general, Clara as a narrator is not afraid to admit her fallibility on comfortable topics, but she generally steers clear of delving too deeply into subjects on which people frequently have strong opinions, such as sex, morality and behavior toward other family members.

- Giving others the benefit of the doubt

Clara usually tempers her (rare) criticism of others by pairing it with conciliatory statements or by speculating on the circumstances of others. After describing her Aunt Friedel as a demanding woman, she repeatedly mentions that she was fundamentally a good person:

“And really, she was a very good woman. She and her husband actually had made plans to go to Brazil where her husband had a brother and his family. And in April of ’38, my uncle, who lived in the United States, his wife died of childbirth when they had their second baby. Their first one was four years old. She died a few days after childbirth. So here he was, over here and all by himself with two little children. And my aunt ... she came over here to help her brother with his two little ones.”

In these ways, Clara as a narrator seems relatively comfortable with contradiction and her own fallibility, but these do not make good, instructive stories, and so they are not generally elaborated upon.

Only intermittent reflection/curiosity about the past

While Clara frequently admits confusion or uncertainty, she does not frequently speculate about information she does not have. The few times Clara does speculate are when prompted by a specific question and are usually related to missing historical information:

“Something I regret, I just thought of something I regret. Not asking the older family members about things. It puzzles me so ... there would be troop train after troop train coming into our town ... But I didn’t understand when I think of how many trains were coming in, where did they all go? Unless they were actually hiding them thinking there was an attack.”
Aside from wondering about such historic mysteries, Clara does not unless specifically asked speculate about past events. For example, when I asked her where her mother’s zealousness in housecleaning came from and whether it could be defined as an obsession, Clara said:

“I don’t know, you know your Europeans are extremely conscious of—I mean they sweep their sidewalks and patios daily ... when we visited there in ’99, in the villages, I won’t say that the cities—you still see that going on out there.”

It was thus more difficult to get Clara to reflect upon events she had not already reflected upon herself. Perhaps Clara felt our interviews were not an appropriate forum for free reflection.

All of these features showed repeatedly in Clara’s narration and are useful structural elements that both help to make her narratives more interesting and, as we will see, relate to her personal characteristics.

**Clara’s Life Themes**

Several major themes emerged in my seven hours of interviews with Clara, delineated and supported by the narrative style described above.

**Early feelings of inferiority/helplessness**

When asked to describe herself in our very first interview, Clara immediately said that she is more confident now than she was as a young woman. Repeatedly in our talks, Clara mentioned troubles she had with her older sister, which put pressure on her to help her mother around the house, and how her mother often discouraged her from doing things such as getting a job as a nurse’s aide and going to business college in Columbus. These narratives, combined with stories of fear and helplessness while living as a Jewish child in pre-Second World War Nazi Germany, seem to have made Clara a young woman
without much confidence or self-assurance, and she seems to see many of her life experiences as helping her overcome that.

**Construction of self as typical**

It is possible that Clara’s early memories of persecution and fear drove her to seek this type of appreciation from others. Upon arriving in the United States, Clara was driven by a strong desire to assimilate:

"See when we first got here my sister and I, this is one thing we did have in common, we wanted to be accepted. We had reached the point where we were disliked, abused even over there because of our religion, so we wanted everybody to love us and like us so we did everything as quickly as we could, to learn the language, to learn the games kids played on the playground, that type of thing."

Clara with few exceptions portrays herself as “naturally” and effortlessly participating in activities and life phases typical of her generation. This is in accordance with Shenk’s interviews with a Midwestern woman descended from German immigrants who “tells the story of her life in terms that are in accord with the norms and values of her rural community” (Shenk 2002). Of her approach to parenthood, Clara said “It just came naturally” and “I enjoyed being a mother and that was one of the things ya did!” In fact, the only times Clara describes herself as atypical are specifically relating to her early status as an immigrant and non-citizen:

"I think we were probably more, trying to think what word I want to use, tolerant of other religions, other colors, than a lot of young people at that age because we’d been persecuted for our religion."

Aside from this unusual tolerance, Clara seems to have achieved the integration she so desired as a child: Clara portrays herself as a Christian woman who is an average representative of her American generation, very different from the outcast Jewish German girl she once was.
Clara’s presentation of herself as typical may also result from a gendered style of storytelling. Of her experience with gender inequality, Clara said “I did what I wanted to do, possibly needed to do at the time. I don’t have a lot of envy.” But according to scholar Ruth Ray, “women ... are more likely to present achievements in terms of luck, chance, or a ‘calling,’ rather than deliberate choice or aggressive pursuit. Rarely found ... (particularly [among] white middle-class American women) is the language of willfulness” (Ray 1998). In presenting herself as typical, Clara is thus typical of her generation of women!

**Family**

Clara’s family has throughout her life been extremely important. She repeatedly said how much she enjoyed being a mother and said that raising her family is her biggest achievement. This is consistent with a 2004 study of Midwestern Caucasian “rural elders” in which more than half cited their families as their most important achievement (Dorfman et. al. 2004). Clara spent 20 years as a stay-at-home mother and greatly enjoyed doing things like planning children’s parties and volunteering at her children’s schools. Clara’s narratives directly and indirectly reinforce her dedication to being a mother:

> “I know one of the biggest compliments our son paid us one time was he said to me ‘Mom, one thing I can say about you is you never played favors when I was kid.’”

Sometimes Clara wryly admits she may have gone overboard:

> “I would make special cookies ... And one time I asked [Michael] how the kids liked their cookies, and he said—he him-hummed around, and I said ‘Is there something wrong with them?’ Mind you this is a five-year-old. He said ‘Well some of the kids didn’t want to eat ‘em.’ And I said ‘Why?!’ [laughter] He says they thought they were too pretty, they wanted to take ‘em home!’”

Clara’s dedication to her family is sometimes concomitant with disapproval of others who did not spend as much time parenting. Clara several times mentioned a good friend
of hers who was not a stay-at-home mother and how she thinks her friend’s son has been negatively affected by his mother’s work:

“But you know that young man still hasn’t found his niche. I think her daughters have done fantastic, I think it didn’t bother her daughters at all. But he’s just been a real restless young man and tried many things and failed at them. That haunts me to this day, that maybe he did need mother home more for a while.”

This is one of Clara’s few judgments of other people not tempered with conciliatory statements or doubt, showing her strong opinion that parents should probably stay at home with their children.

Though I did not get to ask about Clara’s marriage specifically, she repeatedly mentioned Thomas’ kindheartedness, generosity and hard work to ensure that his children had a better life than he had. From these mentions and from the time she spends visiting and caring for Thomas, it is clear that Clara remains very in love with and dedicated to Thomas after 58 years.

**Importance of hard work and education**

Clara repeatedly emphasized the importance of education for her children, and she is very proud that all three of her children went to college and have master’s degrees. Clara said that there was no advising or encouragement for her and Thomas to attain higher education, which she chalked up alternately to her immigrant parents’ lack of knowledge and to Thomas’ “home situation” in which education was simply not promoted.

When talking about a variety of topics, Clara stressed how hardworking her parents were and how she values having learned as much from them:

“I never resented it—I feel those experiences made me a better adult ... The finances and running a house.”
This is consistent with the Dorfman study in which “most of the elders spoke affectionately of their lives growing up on a farm or in a small town, even while noting hardships” (Dorfman et. al. 2004). Clara said she passed these values on to her own children:

“I always have to laugh, I taught our son to clean and sew and do dishes just like the girls. And of course at time he did not appreciate that ... I think it’s necessary for everybody. Even if you have a stay-at-home wife she might be ill for a week or two or a day or two, and some men are just lost!”

In these ways, Clara feels that hardworking values helped contribute to who she is and sees herself as building on those values by promoting education as a necessity for her own children.

Lack of resentment / satisfaction with life choices

Despite lacking confidence as a young woman and remembering how her mother blocked certain desires, such as becoming a nurse or attending business college in Columbus, Clara feels she learned how to be a good person from her parents and is grateful for her upbringing. Though she “sometimes wonders” how her life might have turned out differently if she had made different choices, she presents herself as unconflicted about her life choices by emphasizing how much she liked the things she did choose to do:

“If I had not become a wife, if I had not become a mother—I would have wanted to have adopted for one thing if we hadn’t been able to have children. I guess I found fulfillment in that ... I’ve often thought being a parent is one of the few jobs that you don’t have any training for, and it’s such a big important job, to guide and direct and teach.”

Clara also repeatedly expresses satisfaction with choices less significant than raising children: the Wallock’s decision to sell their house and move into a condo, their decision a few years ago to start attending a smaller church, and her work experiences, among other things. This seems to be in accordance with typical middle-class narrators,
who “try to explain their lives in terms of personal effort and agency, as well as positive family characteristics… [they] generally assume that choices are dictated by personal abilities and psychological health rather than differentiation in social status” (Ray 1999).

**Conclusion**

Clara in many ways seems to be a typical middle-class, white, Midwestern Christian woman, but some of her narrative techniques and her personal transformation from a Jewish German girl to a Christian American woman, among other things, make her life story truly unique. Despite her own frequent doubts as to whether her story was interesting or useful, Clara’s portrait of growing up in Mount Vernon, Ohio over most of the twentieth century is engaging and personal and reveals many trends that have shaped the lives of millions of rural Americans. I feel privileged to have heard this small part of Clara’s life story, and I hope she continues to share it so others can learn from her rich and richly drawn experiences.
Works Cited


