

Oral Memoirs

of

Bette Skates

An Interview Conducted by

Diana Dombrowski

July 9, 2010

Museum of Seminole County History

Historical Society of Central Florida

Museum of Seminole County History

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Interview Histories

Interviewers: Diana Dombrowski

Transcriber: Diana Dombrowski

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the Museum of Seminole County History, Sanford, Florida.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Bette Skates is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on July 9, 2010.

Abstract

Oral history of Bette Skates, conducted by Diana Dombrowski on July 9, 2010. Historian of the Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Sanford, Florida, Skates discusses growing up in Sanford, how Sanford has changed over time, her educational and family history, her career as a teacher, school integration, the history and activities of the Holy Cross Episcopal Church, her role as church historian, how education has changed over time, and Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

Bette Skates

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Diana Dombrowski

July 9, 2010

Sanford, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Dombrowski This is an interview with Bette Skates, the church historian for Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Sanford. This interview is being conducted on July 8, 2010,¹ at the Museum of Seminole County History. Interviewer is Diana Dombrowski, representing the museum for the Historical Society of Central Florida.

Skates Good.

Dombrowski I just have some basic questions first. Your name is Bette Skates, but where and when were you born?

Skates I was born in Philadelphia[, Pennsylvania] in 1933.

Dombrowski Oh, wow. What brought your family to Florida?

Skates My father's ill health, which is what brings most people to Florida back in the day.

Dombrowski Yeah. That's true. When did you move here? Did you grow up in Central Florida?

Skates I moved to Sanford in 1944.

0:00:47

Growing up in Sanford

Dombrowski Oh, okay. What was it like? Could you describe it? Was it very big? Was it busy?

Skates Sanford was a railroad town. And my father worked for the railroad – is the reason, besides the fact that his health was not good, and he needed to get out of the North. And he was a Georgia boy to begin with. So he wanted to come south. And so when he had this opportunity to work for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, at the freight station, he was very eager to accept the job. We came in on a train that they call the – well, there's two of them. One was the Orange Blossom Special, and the other was the Champion. And this was the passenger train from the North – from Philadelphia and New York. All points north.

¹ Correction: July 9, 2010

When we came into the station, my mother had never – well, yes. Mother had been south before, but we hadn't, as children – very young children. I was ten – nine or ten. And when we pulled into the station and got off the train, the humidity hit us like it was going to knock us out. And I said, "Oh. Let's get back on the train." [laughs].

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates And that was before air – trains were air-conditioned too, but – but it was still cooler on the train.

Dombrowski Wow.

Skates So my dad said, you know, "This is nothing. This is fine. This feels wonderful. Get used to it."

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates [laughs] And my mother – she's just kind of being quiet and fanning herself. We had this – it – it was the old station that was on – on Ninth Street, and they've since torn it down.

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates On Ninth and, uh – well, it was just Ninth Street. I guess there was side street, but I don't recall. right off of French Avenue. Because then the tracks still all – we still had tracks running all over downtown.

Dombrowski Hmm.

Skates They're – they're not there now, because back in the day, when trains first came in – all of the wharves and the produce – everything came in to downtown to the river. So, um, we had – let me get back to my story. So we got off the train and my sister and I – and she was a year younger than I am – and we both started – "Something smells funny. What is it?" My dad said, "Oh, that's sulfur water! Oh, come over here, girls!" He says. "Come over here!" And here's a water fountain, right up against the train station. I think it was a brick train station. Right there, it's all green inside, where the water is coming out. And we're looking at this saying, "Oh, this smells so bad!" You know. We're holding our noses, and he's getting very annoyed with us. "Take a taste of that water. That's healthy water. That's better than drinking that Schuylkill River water you've been drinking in Philadelphia." Of course, my mother is being as she always is – long-suffering. And she said, "Well, they can taste it if they want to." We tasted it and we almost gagged! Sulfur water – the first time you ever taste it, is horrible. You do get used to it. And you do realize that it is healthy.

Dombrowski Okay.

Skates But, it's all the water fountains in the city. And there were water fountains in the parks, and there was one in front of the [First] Baptist Church [of Sanford], and different places. They were all over town. And they were all sulfur water.

Dombrowski Wow.

Skates So you did get used to it.

Dombrowski Oh my goodness. So was the smell everywhere too?

Skates Everywhere. Sulfur smells like rotten eggs.

Dombrowski It does. Yeah. I remember we went to the [Ponce de Leon's] Fountain of Youth [Archaeological Park] and they were giving it out, you know.

Skate Yes, yes. But it's supposed to be good for you. So, we got off the train there. And we—I think we took a cab, because we didn't have a car at that time. And we went to an apartment my father had rented. And I guess I need to say this too, because these are the things that people that haven't lived here don't understand or can't get used to. When we got to the apartment—we had an upstairs apartment. A lovely old two-story house in Sanford just two blocks from where I live now, by the way. And the whole upstairs—this was during the war—and every house in Sanford had been made into apartments and efficiencies, because the Navy base² was here, and housing was a premium.

As we started to go up the stairs, and on the porch was a burlap sack that had something in it. My dad said to me, "Bette, grab that bag and bring it upstairs." We had our suitcase and everything. I went to pick up the bag, and roaches came out of the bag. They were flying roaches and they were flying all over. I don't know how many. It might have been two, but it seemed like a hundred. Of course, I dropped it and screamed and had a hissy fit, a good Southern expression. Someone had left a bag of oranges there for us. And, so roaches, of course—so that was my introduction to Sanford.

The apartment was lovely and it was cool with oak trees. Of course, I found out that oak trees breed roaches too, so we had roaches flying in the windows and things like that. Yeah, like the water, and the humidity—you try to get used to it. I don't think I ever got used to the roaches. But that was my introduction to Sanford.

Dombrowski How long did you live in the apartment?

Skates We lived there for four years, and then my mom bought a house. And my father was ill. I mean, he was very ill, and he knew he was dying. My mother opened a beauty shop downtown, just in 1956, because she knew that she was going to

² Naval Air Station (NAS) Sanford.

have to support the family. He died in '56. So she had her beauty shop for 25-30 years in Downtown Sanford.

Dombrowski That's really nice.

Skates She's the one that could tell the stories [*laughs*].

0:07:13 **How Sanford has changed over time**

Dombrowski Okay [*laughs*]. How has Sanford changed when you were growing up there? It was a big railroad town, and your mother, it seems, was there for a very long time. Did you see it get busier? Or develop more?

Skates Yes, development. The stores that I remember, as growing up, are—I was trying to think if there are any that are still downtown. But, coming from a big city, it was very nice that we could walk everywhere. Ride bicycles.

We went to school at the grammar school and then at Seminole High School, which was just up not too far from my house. I mean, everything was convenient. It was very nice. It was a good, homey feeling, and everybody was friendly. It was a very nice place to grow up, I think. And the schools—my father did not think much of the schools, but then again, in the South, schools hadn't really caught up by that time. It took quite a few years for them to catch up to what we had been used to. But it, you know, was a nice place to grow up. Very nice.

Dombrowski That's—that's nice [*laughs*].

Skates [*laughs*] Yeah.

0:08:47 **Mother's beauty shop**

Dombrowski What was it like for your mother to set up the beauty shop? Was it very difficult? Or...

Skates It was very difficult. My grandparents—her mother and father—had lived in Philadelphia. And they had, um—they sold their property up there and came down, just after my dad died, to live with my mother. I know—to help her. We didn't realize it, at the time, but, um—and they helped her with finances for the beauty shop

Dombrowski Okay.

Skates So that was—it was very nice. And they lived with us actually, until they both died. They lived with my mother. Um, So that was, um—that was the way she could do what she did. The beauty shop was, um—what—what she would charge for what—for the work she did—I wish I had a price list. But I remember one time, she said something about a dollar and quarter for a manicure. We all

said, "Is that all?" She said, "If I had charged a dollar and a half, they wouldn't come back."

Dombrowski Oh, wow.

Skates So, I mean, the prices were – were – were really...

Dombrowski Different.

Skates Different.

Dombrowski [*laughs*].

Skates [*laughs*] Yeah. Yeah. So yeah. But it was her – her hopes[?] – her beauty shop was in the Montezuma Hotel, which that building has burned down since...

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates Then. It was a big hotel that was built here in the 1880s.

Dombrowski Hmm.

Skates It was about four blocks from the river, and People would get off the steam ships and walk up the little hill and – to the hotel. It was called the "Bye Lo Hotel," at the time – I mean, at that time. It was later changed to the Montezuma. But it was – when Mother had the beauty shop there, it was a little spooky

Dombrowski Really?

Skates It was old, you know?

Dombrowski Yeah.

Skates And – and there's a lot of people who still lived there. But, uh, it burned down a few years ago. [*inaudible*]...

Dombrowski Hmm.

Skates About 12 years ago, I guess. So, uh, that was – that was a loss, but it was the first hotel in Sanford that had a swimming pool. Maybe the only...

Dombrowski Oh, wow.

Skates One. It was in the basement...

Dombrowski Oh, okay.

Skates Of the hotel.

Dombrowski That would be cool.

Skates Yeah.

Dombrowski Yeah.

Skates So that was neat. Later, they, uh, put a furnace in the swimming pool and didn't use that anymore. I never saw the swimming pool with water in it.

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates I did see it with a furnace in it.

Dombrowski Oh [laughs].

Skates But, uh, um...

0:11:05 **Going to college, getting married, and raising a family**

Dombrowski Um, Where did you go to school? Did you go to college?

Skates Yes.

Dombrowski Okay.

Skates I did. I went to Stetson University, um...

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates I started at Stetson in 19well, let's see. I was going to OJC—Orlando—it was Orlando Junior College. I went there for a while, and then I went to Stetson. It took me—I—I figured this out one time, but I don't remember. Let's see. 70—It took me about—I hate to say too much, because I—I—it took me a long time to graduate. I got married when I was 18.

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates I went to college, and I spent three months at Middle Georgia College, up in, uh, Cochran, Georgia. My cousins, uh—my dad's sister wanted their daughter to go, and she wouldn't go. She was homesick. And they said, "Well, if Bette would come and go with her, she would go." So I went there, and I spent three months. Had a wonderful time. Made the Dean's List. Was just doing fine, except I had a boyfriend, and I was in love

Dombrowski Aww [laughs].

Skates [laughs]. And my moth—the woman's—the—the—the boy's mother kept saying, "Well, I was married when I was 18," So I decided that it was good enough for her, it was good enough for me. So I married him. So...

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates I went to college in between having my children.

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates Every time I could get, uh—I could find some money, or get a loan, or—there—there were student loans—there were [Federal] Pell Grants we could get. They—Loans were much easier to get in those days, so I could get student loan. So I would go to school for a while and then I would get pregnant again. And then I'd...

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates Go to school for a while and then I would get pregnant again.

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates This went on until 1964—well, it—let's see when. I don't remember how many years. But I finally started teaching when I was—when it was, um—it was 1965, I think.

Dombrowski Oh, okay.

Skates So it took me a long time to get certified to teach, but I did. And then I taught for 30 years in Seminole County.

Dombrowski Wow.

Skates Yeah. Which has been exciting.

Dombrowski How many children did you have?

Skates I have four children.

Dombrowski Oh, okay.

Skates Yeah. So I was kind of spacing this. Finally—I might want to censor this—finally about 1968, my husband got tired of it. Anybody, I guess, could understand that. He said—he didn't sign on for that. So that was alright. But we managed, very well, and thank goodness I had my education so I could support my family. So it was good.

0:13:43 Career in education and school integration

Dombrowski So you taught in the school system for 30 years. What was it like in the 60's? What was integration like?

Skates My first 10 years, I taught out in Geneva [Elementary School].

Dombrowski Oh, I like Geneva.

Skates Oh, I love Geneva. I still hear from those kids. They're great. Of course, they're not kids. They're grown. It was wonderful. It was probably the best teaching assignment you could have for a beginning teacher. Because by that time, I was 35 when I started teaching.

I was trying to think of how to put this. The schools had not been integrated much at that time. I don't remember the year that I had the first black student, but I had a sweet boy. Now I was teaching fifth grade. He had come up through the grades. There was only five grades – five classrooms – at Geneva.

And the first year that I taught there, I taught in the auditorium, because there was no place. So what they did was take out the first couple rows of seats and let us set the classroom up right in front of the stage. Which was good until I got a couple of kids that were a little bit older than they should have been in fifth grade – a boy and a girl. And next thing I knew, they were behind the stage, and I had to go get them. They were good kids, and they really didn't do anything bad, I don't think. But I would have been in big trouble.

But anyway, the first black child I had – I was going to say I'll never forget his name, and I did. What a sweetheart he was [*laughs*].

Dombrowski [*laughs*].

Skates But he was just testing. He was testing us, going to see if the system was going to work. He was a nice kid. Good parents. If I called his parents before he left school, by the time he got off the bus at home, they were back at the school to see what he had done or hadn't done. Because he didn't like to do homework and he didn't like to do class work. Guess he had just been allowed to get away with more than he should have. But he wasn't used to me. Anyway, he was a nice kid. Yeah, it was interesting, and the children we had at Geneva – the black and the white children – were I think just the salt of the earth. I mean they were really good people. Parents were country folks, most of them at that time. Now, later on, when UCF [University of Central Florida] opened, we started getting a different group of children. Their parents were more educated. They were professors and people that worked at the college. And so by the time I left Geneva, it had changed a good bit.

My two younger boys, I brought with me to Geneva, so I taught two of my own children in fifth grade. Which was – everybody says, "How is it working?" I said, "It works fine." No problem. They were good kids to begin with. It worked out. It was fine. That was good too, because, that was, at the time, in Sanford. My two older children – there were a lot of problems at schools in Sanford, with the integration. They started busing – I don't remember the year. When I was going to Geneva, my daughter was being bused to what used to be an all-black high school – Crooms High School – which they did just to integrate. And that was wrong. Because the kids – the black kids were not happy, the white kids were not

happy. And the black teachers and the white teachers were all upset about it, but they were busing the kids across town. So I'm driving to Geneva ten miles away and my daughter is in a bus driving across the city, and I don't know where she is and what's happening. It was worrisome. But it all worked out. It just took time and a lot of patience on both sides. It should never have been separate to begin with, but we have to fix our mistakes.

Dombrowski So tensions were high?

Skates Very high.

Dombrowski Was it ever violent?

Skates Yeah. There was violence. A lot of it was threatened. You know, just like, if you go down this street, we're going to throw rocks at the bus and things like that. That was very worrisome. And my oldest son, when he was in ninth – and well, high school. It was ninth grade at Crooms. But when he was in ninth grade and tenth grade – all through school, he was a big boy, and had red hair. And it was a novelty. He got a lot of – he did his best to stay out of trouble, but trouble came to him. And of course, he tells me now he got blamed for a lot of things he didn't do, but I'm not going to go there. You know how kids are. Anyway, he hung in there. His high school experiences were very bad. Very bad. Yeah. It was real sad. But my daughter didn't seem to have the problems. She was also redheaded, but she seemed to go with the flow easier. He was a target. You know, a big guy. But he's not a fighter. He didn't want to fight, but anyway. We got through it [*laughs*].

0:20:03

Home and family

Dombrowski Good [*laughs*]. Did you all live in Sanford at the time? Did you drive to Geneva and back?

Skates I drove to Geneva. Yeah. I bought the house that I'm still living in, in 1958.

Dombrowski Wow.

Skates Yeah. So I raised my family there. And just last couple years ago, we celebrated our 50th – I said, I'll never have a golden wedding anniversary – so we celebrated our golden anniversary living in the house. So the kids got together and each one did something. But anyway, they have a photograph of the house framed in a beautiful frame that my grandson found when he was working for the College Hunks Hauling Junk. He found a frame and on the bottom of it my daughter wrote in gold, "Thanks for the memories." So it's very nice. I have it hanging over the piano. It's very nice.

Dombrowski That's wonderful. So it's downtown?

Skates Yes. It's downtown. If you go—First Street is the street where all the commerce is, where the business is. I live between Eleventh [Street] and Twelfth [Street] on Park Avenue. And Park Avenue's the main street that goes down to the lakefront, and used to be [U.S. Route] 17-92 back in the day. That is where traffic went through the town. It's in the historic district.

The house was built in 1924. It's probably more than anybody wants to know, but it's called a "Craftsman Airplane Bungalow." Because the upstairs is one room, and a bathroom, and it has 12 windows all the way around. So it looks like you're looking out airplane windows. You're not. They're regular windows, but anyway, that's what it's called.

Dombrowski That sounds really cool. I love Craftsman style.

Skates Yes. It's really nice. I have pillars on that house that are real unique. They're made out of coquina.

Dombrowski Wow.

Skates Yeah. My fireplace—the chimney is made out of coquina. And it's much higher than the first floor. It goes up past the second floor, because the second floor is sitting kind of in the middle of the house. It's really neat. You'll have to come see me.

Dombrowski This sounds like a real Florida house.

Skates It is a real Florida house. Yeah. For a good many years we didn't have air conditioning, so we had what they called an "attic fan" that's up in the second floor attic. When you turn it on and you open a window in each room, one window—it sucks the cool night air in and keeps the house cool. Only it slams doors, you have to be real careful, because doors get sucked. You get slamming doors all day. But it was neat. I don't remember being miserable.

Dombrowski Well, good.

Skates I don't remember being exactly hot. So it must have worked.

0:23:07

Church life

Dombrowski Were you a member of the church since you moved here?

Skates No. We were Lutheran when we first moved here. My sister and I had both been confirmed in the Lutheran Church in Philadelphia. And so I convinced my husband that he should join the Lutheran church, and so we went as a family until he left. And well, the kids were teenagers, and you know how hard it is to get teenagers to go to church. So I just decided that I had always loved the [Holy Cross] Episcopal Church, and I loved the architecture, and the history, and Jesus. I'm sorry, Jesus. I get carried away. But so we—my daughter and I, and my

youngest son—all joined the Episcopal church. My two older sons were not interested. But they were grown by that time, and I didn't feel like I could force them to do that. They had to want to do that. And I'm still a member.

But how I got the job as historian, I made the mistake of correcting someone. You know how when someone says, "Oh, it was 1873—2, or something?" I said, "No, it was '73." "We need a historian. You're—you're it. You're going to do it." [laughs].

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates I said, *Oh, my gosh. I should keep my mouth shut.* [laughs].

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates But I love it. I've been doing this since, um, [20]04.

Dombrowski Wow. Okay.

0:24:45 **History of General Henry Shelton Sanford and the Holy Cross Episcopal Church**

Skates Yeah. So the church, they said, had no written history. I've—I've found all kinds of stuff, so it's—I've collected it. I've got it together. I write a news, uh, article each month for our church newsletter that goes out every month, telling, you know, whatever it is I found out recently about the church. And so it's—it's a good thing. I enjoy it.

Dombrowski Could you speak a little about the church? When it was founded, you know?

Skates Yes,. This was General [Henry Shelton] Sanford's church. When General Sanford—Henry Sheldon Sanford—came to this area in 1870—probably 1870. It was after the Civil War, and he was trying, as a lot of—I don't want to call them "carpetbaggers," but some people do. A lot of people—wealthy northerners—came down and tried to make their fortune, or another fortune. He had been ambassador to Belgium. They called him a liaison. Liaison? That doesn't sound right. Well, anyway, yeah. I guess he was. But he also was a spy for the Union Army during the war—the Civil War.

Dombrowski Oh, my goodness.

Skates And he was traveling around going to different foreign capitals, trying to get some of those countries to send ammunition and guns to the North. So there's a whole big story that I haven't even started on of his spying for the North. But when he finished up with that job—I guess he retired from that job, because he was probably in his 50s then, I think. He married a beautiful lady. She was living in Belgium, but she was from the United States. The Sanford Museum has a huge, gorgeous painting of the home they lived in, in Belgium. It looks like a

small – like maybe the Queen might have had that summer home, or something. It was beautiful. We have friends in Sanford that have visited that area and that house, and they're using that house as a retreat for nuns now. Anyway, General Henry Sanford – he became a general, because he gave some cannons to the state of Minnesota, because he wanted a title. So the Governor of Minnesota [Alexander Ramsey] made him a general.

So, anyway, let's see. Let me get back to the church. So he bought a lot of land down on the lakefront. He was right for his time, that Sanford – and of course it wasn't called Sanford in those days) – that this area, Mellonville, was going to be the "Gateway to South Florida." Because all supplies – food, you know, everything that people need to start up a homestead – they would have to buy in Sanford. So he had a lumber mill. Somebody else had a grocery store. I mean they had all things people, you know, the pioneers, would need.

He bought orange trees from all over, and he planted orange trees. One of his groves – his first grove [St. Gertrude's Grove] – was downtown right on the lakefront where there's apartment buildings and city hall and things there now. Citrus didn't do too well there. The soil apparently wasn't good enough, and so they moved out to what he called Belair [Grove], and that's out towards Lake Mary, around the lakes. So, his Belair Groves[sic] were very profitable.

About 1873, he decided that there needed to be a church. He and his wife, Gertrude [Dupuy Sanford] – now, Gertrude didn't come here much, because this was not her cup of tea. And when you see pictures of her as a young girl, she's absolutely beautiful. Beautiful clothes, and very high class. And they had about five children and they were all born in Europe. She didn't come here often. But he planted Belair in orange and lemon trees. He had a grove manager whose name was Reverend Lyman Phelps. General Sanford was from Connecticut. And he convinced this Episcopal priest to come down to start a church. Well, he did, but he also made Lyman Phelps his agent and his farm grove manager, because the man had a background in botany too. The man was very, uh, – he was very versatile.

When, um – when General Sanford – I call him "General Sanford". A lot of people say he – he doesn't deserve that title, but it just comes easy to me, for some reason. It – it denotes a lot of the things that he did, other than just being Henry Sanford. Um, so they started to build this church, and Mrs. Sanford wrote to all of her wealthy friends, and in her letters, she said, "Please, um, help us build our dear little church." And that was her – the way she called it – their "dear little church" in San – in – in this city. Someone, finally, along the line – a friend of his daughter – [inaudible] said – said, "Well, we should call this city 'Sanford,' after you, Mr. Sanford." And Mr. Sanford said, "Ha. What a good idea."

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates [laughs]. And I don't remember the years that that was – that was started. But, so anyway, by 1873, they had completed the church. Lyman Phelps and Reverend Holeman – H-O-L-E-M-A-N – um, were priests there. And they had, um, services that – these priests – I – when I read their – in the diocesan records, there's – they had to keep records of what trips they went on and where they went. They rode horses, walked – horse and buggy – through Florida sand, which anybody that walks through it knows that – there was[sic] highways. The only way you went were by animal, you know, roads, where animals, or maybe the Indians, had made them. Um, they went to, um – but they went all over Central Florida. They went to Eustis, to Longwood, to Orlando. They started the St. Luke's Church in Orlando, which is now the Cathedral [Church of St. Luke]. They went all over Central Florida, uh, especially Lyman Phelps. Um, But he – they were, um – it just amazes me, when I read their exploits, and the alligators...

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates You know, the mosquitoes, the – oh, my soul. But, um, anyway, so that's how the – the Episcopal church got its start. That church – that was built in 1873. 1880, along comes – and they called it a "tornado," and I haven't been able to say that it wasn't, but I think it was more like a hurricane, and maybe a tornado – a tornado was [inaudible]. It blew down Mrs. Sanford's dear little church.

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates And we have pictures of it. And the – the steeple is laying on the ground, and the church is still standing, but it's – it's – it's damaged. So they got busy. Mrs. Sanford raised some more money, and by, um, 1880, they had built another – well, yeah. It was 1873. By 1880, the church blew down. By 1881, they had a new church built. That church survived until 1923, and it burned down.

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates So they – 1924 and '25, they rebuilt it. So the church standing on that property is still on the same property that Sanford gave us. That church now was built, uh, in 19 – 1924, it was completed. It's, uh, what they call "Spanish Mediterranean" [Architecture]. It's...

Dombrowski Oh.

Skates Very Spanish-looking. It's a very pretty church.

Dombrowski Where is it?

Skates It's on the corner of Fourth – Park Avenue and Fourth Street.

Dombrowski Okay.

Skates And the parish hall was built by 1926. So one of the things I always thought was interesting, when they first built – or probably the second church – in the side where they had some room, they put orange trees so that in case times were bad, they would have some money. They would have a way of getting money still.

Dombrowski Aw.

Skates That was kind of interesting.

Dombrowski Um, I do have a question. I don't know much about the church in Sanford. Is it the main church for the city? Are most of the people in Sanford Episcopalian?

Skates No, no. They're not. Probably back in the day, it was the only church, but then of course, the South is mostly Methodist and Baptist. And right now the street – Park Avenue should have been called "Church Street." Because there's the Episcopal – well, first, a block closer to the lake was the Congregational church. But since they've moved that – they tore it down and moved down Park Avenue. The next church was Holy Cross. Then, next door to us is the [First United] Methodist Church [of Sanford]. Right next door to that is the [First] Baptist Church [of Sanford].

So on Sunday mornings, we used to have a real traffic jam down there. Not so much anymore. No, Holy Cross – I think it's like all the churches. They're struggling. But we're still here. We have two services, an 8 o'clock service and a 10 o'clock service. If we had everybody at 10 o'clock, we would have a good crowd. But when you separate it into two – the people who go at 8 o'clock won't come at 10. The people who come at 10 o'clock won't go at 8 o'clock. So our priest does two services. And yeah, it's a busy little church. We have a fairly good-sized Sunday school, considering Sunday schools are hard for churches these days too. So, probably at one time it was the center of the area, church-wise, but not anymore.

0:36:08 Trends in congregational membership

Dombrowski In your time as a historian there, have you – reading through the documents and that sort of thing, have you noticed any trends in how many members they had? Like when UCF came, did more people come to the church?

Skates It was the biggest – the largest crowds that we have ever had was through the war years when we had a Navy base in Sanford. And that started up as a training base for carrier – for planes to land on carriers. I'm not as familiar with the history of the Navy base, but it closed at the end of World War II, and it was a big drop in the congregation. But then when [the] Korea[n War] came back, they started the base up again. And a lot of those people too have been Navy people – very sophisticated – have been all over the world. Lived in many different places.

So those are the people we seem to pull in more than the people that grew up here. Most Southern people are Baptist. My dad's family — they were all Baptist. But it's different. Different churches suit different people. I mean, you want whatever it is that makes you feel the presence, or that you feel that you need, that's where you should be. So I'm very ecumenical. I can, um, belong to any church you want to [laughs]. But Holy Cross is lovely. And the services are beautiful [laughs].

0:37:59

Church involvement in the Sanford community

Dombrowski Uh, how involved has the church been in the community? Do they hold a lot of, have they held a lot of events?

Skates Sanford — Holy Cross — was the “Guiding Light for Grace and Grits,” which is to feed the homeless. It's a feeding program that we had at Holy Cross. And I can't remember these years, it's been going on for a long time. And we had it at Holy Cross. Every Wednesday night, Holy Cross would feed, oh, a hundred people. But it would depend on the season and what. Homeless people from all over. And not just men, but families. People would come to eat.

A few years ago, we wanted to remodel the parish hall, which is where the kitchen is. And we opted to find another place to hold the Wednesday night feedings — dinners, I should say — and that was — that was hard, because the people at the church — and we have some people who are so dedicated to this — they finally found that the City [of Sanford] would let them use the [Sanford] Civic Center. It costs, I think, \$200 a month or something like that. We have to pay the City for that. So now they're feeding them down there. And also, during the transition when the parish hall was being refurbished, and the kitchen was — when we had a new priest — he really has done a lot. I mean, he has Wednesday night services, and so they had a meal there on Wednesday nights, and classes and everything. So that kind of made them want to keep the “Grace and Grits” out there. And Holy Cross wasn't the only one that does this. I must explain this. Every church — not every church, but many churches in Sanford — there's a Methodist church, St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Lake Mary, the [All Souls] Catholic Church [of Sanford]. All of them.

Dombrowski Just a minute here. Just to make sure.

Skates All of them have people that come and help so we're not doing it by ourselves. Did it run out of battery?

Dombrowski No. It's working. No. It's working, I just wanted to make sure that the whole thing had recorded and everything. I'm sorry.

Skates But anyway, it's a whole city thing. There's a whole lot of people involved in this. So, yeah. We do that. We also have our new priest — well at least not that new anymore. He's been here 2 or 3 years, and he's very much involved in helping the homeless. They call it “SACON[sp].” I couldn't tell you what it

stands for, but they go to different places in the neighborhoods and help homeless people get ID cards. Because if they don't have an ID card, they can't—well, there's a lot of things they can't do. They can't even get shelter sometimes, if they're going to shelters. So this has been a good thing. And helping—it's helping the city to know what the population is of the homeless, and where they're staying and what they're doing. So that's a good thing. He was just very much involved in that.

We have some kind of a health thing one day a week at Holy Cross in the mornings, where people can come. I'm not really sure what, I guess I shouldn't say anything about it, because I'm not sure what that is. I don't what the group is that's doing it. But yeah, Holy Cross is involved.

0:42:08

Church memorials and artifacts

Dombrowski Uh, is there anything about the church that you'd like to discuss that we haven't covered?

Skates We have a lot of memorials in Holy Cross that I've been trying to—and this is a hard job. We actually have two memorial books that from the beginning people have—the gifts of love that they've given in memory of someone that they lost. But when I go to the memorial books, there are items in there that we no longer have. We've had a couple of break-ins over the years, so they've lost some things, and then there's items that we have that aren't listed. So we've endeavored to work on this. I was trying to take pictures and it's just one other job that I haven't finished. It takes a lot of time to do that. And I really—I could get help—old-timers, because I'm not an old-timer there. They'll say, "Oh no, I remember that was given in memory of so-and-so."

Right now, I'm working on—when the church was rebuilt in 1923-1924, the altar and the pulpit at the front was very plain. I can only tell from pictures, but unattractive. And in 1940, sometime, a member of the choir—and I'm still working on this. This is one of those strings you have to keep following and try to see if you can come to the end—was killed in an automobile accident. And he is—what's the word? They have said that he had given in 1945 money to buy a new altar. A new altar, and reredos behind the altar, and an altar, and chairs. We have a lot of furniture, because it's a very formal church. I don't think you call it "High Episcopal." I think some people might, but we have a good candelabra, good communion-ware. A lot of stuff. And anyway, this man—apparently there was a big brouhaha that the vestry wanted to put a new roof on the church, which is a tile roof—which always needs work—or to buy the altar furniture. And just recently I talked to a lady, who's in a—a Heritage [at Lake Forest] nursing home out here, who was telling me about this. I didn't know this story. And she said, "Oh, my goodness." She said, "Everybody was fighting, and everybody was mad. They wanted the roof." "No, no. We want the altar." Well anyway, the altar people won out, because the priest wanted the altar...

Dombrowski [*laughs*].

Skates Redone [*laughs*]. So, uh—so I’m still working on that. And, as, uh, oral tradition says, that that money was used for the new altar-ware—altar and furniture, I should say—um, by this man, who gave it, But, um—in honor—in [inaudible]—yeah. In of our members who fought in World War II.

Dombrowski Okay.

Skates So I asked one of our older members if he remembers that. He says, “Oh yeah, there’s a plaque up there in the front of the church someplace that tells all the members that died. I’m sure it says something about ‘in memory of’ that.” Well, the plaque wasn’t there, so several ladies started on a search of the rooms, and they found the plaque. Only, it wasn’t a plaque. It’s a big framed picture with 70 names beautifully written by someone on there, with little gold stars next to five men who were killed during the war. But I still don’t know if it’s a memorial to them for the furniture. So I’m working on that, because I have the big memorial plaque reframed and I guess we’ll rededicate it one of these days when we find out what’s the story on it. But there’s things like that that come up when someone will say, “Well, who gave that baptismal font? What was that all about?”

Or, we have two things in the church—this is interesting—we have two things in the church that we know for certain were there in the first church. That General Sanford gave: a crucifixion picture that he had bought in Belgium and donated it to the church. That picture—and we were trying to get an idea of the value of it—and the man that we had restore it said, “It’s not worth a thing. All it’s worth is what it’s worth to the congregation. But as far as famous artist, no.” It’s the crucifixion. Even after it as restored, still doesn’t look very good. Because it went through the hurricane the first time. Through the fire the second time. Someone rescued it. So it has—the restorer said it has water damage. So that was something that we know General Sanford physically probably touched, and that it was there. The other thing is a small lectern, where they put the Bibles on, or the prayer book. And that’s in the chapel that was given by Reverend Lyman Phelps. We think he built it. He made it in memory of his wife. So that’s pretty interesting to have two things back a hundred and how many years—138 years or whatever it is.

Dombrowski Oh. That’s very special.

Skates Yeah. It is special. So it’s the history. I mean, I could go to any church. I love—just love churches. But I love the history of this church. It’s—and I’m sure that if I were in Philadelphia I’d go to Christ Church I went to Williamsburg [*Virginia*]³—my mother and I—we went to the—oh, what was the name of that Episcopal church⁴ there? It’s so beautiful in Williamsburg.⁵ Where Patrick Henry gave his speech.

³ Correction: Richmond, Virginia.

⁴ St. John’s Church.

Dombrowski In Virginia?

Skates In Virginia. That was—so it's the ambiance. It's what you feel. It's very interesting. And I do get excited about it [*laughs*].

Dombrowski I'm just going to check the battery one more time. Oh, it looks fine. Whoa. I didn't notice the bars. They change as I talk and get closer. But the battery's fine. Okay, great.

0:49:33

Role as church historian

Dombrowski So, uh, you're a historian there. It sounds like you do a bunch of different things.

Skates I'm kind of a detective. There's not a day goes—well, a day—there probably is. But not a week goes by that someone says, "Bette"—well somebody asked me the other day, "Isn't our,"—we have a huge bell on the bell tower—"Isn't that bell called 'Raphael?'" I said, "No, I don't think—that's not the name of the bell." And he said, "Oh, I'm pretty sure it is." Well, now I have to figure it out. Is it or isn't it? Or, people will say, "Well, where did the bell come from?"

Oh, and then we have this magnificent organ of Ferrante[sp] Brothers organ from—I can't remember where it's from. I want to say Canada, but I may be wrong. It was installed in 1947, and this is just a magnificent piece of furniture. Ferrante[sp] Brothers. I believe there's another name that goes with that. I guess I can't remember. But anyway, it doesn't matter. This is not a test. That was put in in 1947, and I've forgotten how many pipes there are for it, but—oh, more than 100 pipes. There's pipes and pipes. Pipes that you can see over the choir loft, but there's also a whole closet full of pipes. Our organist—she knows how to play it. It's just beautiful. So that was—I don't know where the money for that came from. As far as that being a memorial, or something, I don't know. I don't think so. So many things are, but that's not. But someone will say, "Well, what year was the organ installed?" Or, "Where did it come from?"

So I—yeah. I do. I have to have a little notebook in my pocketbook and I keep writing it down and then I have to go back and research it. And I have a lot of friends too that have been long, long-time members there, so I usually go to them and say, "Do you know anything about this?" And some of them will say, "No, I don't know." Or, "We'll look it up." But we have—and I'm trying to get all the histories together and put them in one place so it's pretty organized. It's fairly organized, but not as much as I would like to have it done. But I've saved all the newsletters[sic] columns that I've written over the years. I have them each in a different notebook with acid-free paper so after I type them I print them off and put them in the folders and so I've got all that. So that's a pretty good history right there. It's good. Did I answer the question? [*laughs*].

Dombrowski Yeah. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

⁵ Correction: Richmond, Virginia.

Skates Also, I must give credit to Alicia Clarke at the Sanford Museum. We have much help from her. And then some! Sorry.

0:52:40 **How education has changed over time**

Dombrowski [laughs] No. I don't mind at all. I know we've been talking for a long time now, but if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to find out more about what your time as an educator was like Seminole County.

Skates Oh, I think I had the best 30 years that you could have had really, because it was – right now, I have friends, my neighbors. I have a lot of friends still teaching, and it's very different now. It's very different. We had – the wonderful thing we had that teachers today don't have, and that's freedom. You can't say – if Johnny brings in a whole bag of shells that he had his mother just collected at the beach, we can't dump those shells out and sit down and go through them and maybe catalog them or talk about them or what can we do with it. There's no way of being spontaneous, because teachers today – if that child brought that in, I would have to say, "I'm sorry, you're going to have to put that away. We don't have time to look at that." And that bothers me a lot. Because I really feel like the teachable moment is when the kid is interested. And if nobody is interested, then there's no teachable moment.

It's – when I was teaching at Idyllwilde [Elementary School] one year, the kids found a dead rabbit on the playground. I have a friend who had just moved here from Chicago[, Illinois], and she was working with me at the time. She was getting ready to take over half of my class, because I had 45 kids in my class. And they had hired her to take part of my kids. But she tells me about this every time she thinks about it. She said, "So, the kids wanted to know what to do with the rabbit." And I said, "Well, we're going to have to bury it. Let's bury it." So we got a shovel from the janitor and the boys dug a hole right outside the classroom door. And buried the rabbit. Well, they got to talking about what was going to happen to the rabbit in the ground. Well, of course the kids – and these were fourth and fifth graders – they would say, "Well, the bugs and the worms are going to eat him," and so forth. So, just before school was out, the boy that dug the hole said, "Ms. Skates, can we dig that rabbit up? See what's left? See if we can find his bones?" And I said, "Well, that's a good idea. Let's do it." So we did. We couldn't find it! This kid dug up a whole area as big as this table. Couldn't find a thing left of the rabbit.

Dombrowski Oh, my goodness.

Skates But that sounds – and it would probably almost be silly to some educator – but those are things that – what did they learn? Well, we could put a whole bunch of things on the board. We learned this. We learned, you know – what is this? So, or you know – well like the space shuttle. We had classes when the Space Shuttle [Challenger] blew up. We all went outside on the playground to watch the space shuttle go up. And this was – what was this? [19]89?

Dombrowski Oh, I have it here. No, I don't.

Skates But anyway, we were all out on the playground, watching, and we saw it went up, and we saw all these stars and everything. The kids were all saying, "Look at that. They're putting out stars," all kinds of things that kids would think of. And my fellow teacher was standing next to me, she said, "I think we ought to take the kids in." I said, "Okay." So we take the kids in. Well, she happened to have a little TV set in her closet. And we brought that out to see what had happened. And we could do that. You couldn't do that today.

Dombrowski That's true.

Skates She brought it out and we set that out between our two classrooms. We watched it all day long. The kids—it was very sad. We all were grieving. So we grieved together. So, what is this? How did this happen? All we could do was speculate. We didn't know. But what would you, you know, you...

0:56:59

Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)

Skates Well, first off, I think taking time outside would probably take time away from teaching about the FCAT [Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test].

Dombrowski I was going to ask how you think the FCAT has influenced—okay.

Skates You know, every week, teachers, back in the day—and I retired in [19]97. Every teacher gave a test at the end of the week. You would take your math book and go through—and everything that I had taught in math that week—the test would be on Friday. Same thing with spelling tests—on Friday. Social studies on Friday. And we did teach social studies. We did teach the Constitution. We did teach early American history. We did teach that. I think that, in fifth grade, we stopped at the Civil War, but that's all we had time for. So, you gave the test. At the end of the week, you knew what the child had done. By the time you correct those papers, you knew that Johnny and Mary and Susie were having trouble with multiplication. So next week, let's zero in on those three and their multiplication tables. How hard is that? I mean, why do we have to do what they're doing now? I don't understand.

Dombrowski I don't want to interject my opinion too much, but my mother teaches middle school. And so I've heard a lot about FCAT, and a great deal about how it's changed. She used to teach in New York and it's very different.

Skates Oh, yes. I think, even now—well, this friend of mine that came down—she wasn't a friend at the time, but now she's my best friend—from Chicago, you know. She'd said, "Oh, my gosh. These schools—they're so far behind! In Chicago in fifth grade, we were doing this." And you know, well, it takes a long time. I mean, you know, the [Great] Depression hit the South harder. The agricultural society makes a difference. Kids are not—they may be working in the fields some. I mean not so much in my time, but it was just different. And it

takes a long, you know—I think this a lot about even the ship of state, it takes a long time to turn a ship around. And it takes a long time to turn the education system around. It's like it's the biggest boat you ever saw and you're just trying to turn it around and make things better. I think we've come a long way, but I think there probably still is a way to go.

But now we've got—it's so muddled with this FCAT and this—pushing, pushing these kids. My grandson goes to a parochial school. Goes to St. Luke's Lutheran Church School in Oviedo. He doesn't have that stigma hanging over his head. He's going in third grade. He loves school. He's a good student. And he struggled to begin with. He had problems with his reading. But if he were in the public school, he would really be in trouble. First off, he'd be going into the third grade. You have to take the FCAT. If you don't pass that, you have to repeat third grade. Well, his handwriting is very poor, what are you going to do about that? But the private school—they give them more time. They also give them more one-on-one situations. I don't know. I'm just so that glad that his mother and father—my son and his wife—are so wise. And it's a sacrifice. It's a lot of money every month to keep him in private school. He's their only child, which is a good thing. It's tough. Your mother is right, and she's right in the middle of that FCAT business in middle school.

1:01:21

Historical events

Dombrowski Uh, you mentioned the *Challenger* accident. Are there any other events that stick out in your mind, that you remember teaching or going through with your students?

Skates What did we have? [John F.] Kennedy's assassination didn't affect me, but it did my children. They were in elementary school and Kennedy was assassinated—my two older ones. They were talking about this, not long ago, about the atomic bomb scare with the Cuban Missile Crisis. They were talking about the duck-and-cover. You know, an atomic bomb is blowing up over your state, and what do you tell the kids to do? You tell them to get under their desks and cover their head[sic]. That involved them. I wasn't teaching in '63. Let's see, what else could there be? Thinking back to Kennedy, I can't think of anything else.

1:02:25

Cape Canaveral

Dombrowski Okay. Did UCF opening or Cape Canaveral opening change...

Skates It did. I think it changed. With the Cape, with Geneva—the school—when we started getting the influx of people moving to that area. The fathers were engineers and the moms worked, most of them, over there too. Those were great kids. I don't know, maybe because the parents were involved in scientific things like the engineering and everything. Every couple years, it seems like they come up with something new. Your mother can relate to this too.

They taught us what they call the “New Math.” And I’d only been teaching a couple years and we had this great, and I still have the book—a great big blue book about New Math. Well first off, we were supposed to be teaching the metric system, and that was because of the engineering thing, I think. But they had—I remember one of the fathers was an engineer and he came to school and I was struggling as much as the kids were. They gave us the course in the summer and we were supposed to start teaching it in the fall. So I really didn’t—nobody had a chance. The father came in, he said, “Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” Now, how do you talk to an engineer? And I was honest with him, “Well, yes. I do.” I said, “We had six weeks.” I think we had a course. And I said, “Not as much as I’ll know at the end of this year.” And he said, “Well, my son doesn’t know what the hell’s going on.” I said, “Well, I am really sorry.” But he was very nice about. But he really kind of put me on my toes. Which was a good thing. I’m glad he did. But by the end of the year, I even knew what prime numbers were [laughs].

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates In fifth grade, you teach addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. I figured the fact that I could multiply and divide fractions—I was pretty smart [laughs].

Dombrowski [laughs].

Skates Don’t go beyond that. Oh dear.

1:04:51 Children

Dombrowski I just have a couple specific questions left. If you wouldn’t mind, just because it’s a personal history about you, what were the names of your children—are the names of your children?

Skates Phillip, Pamela—well, he’s Jimmy. And the youngest is Bill. They all have their given names, but that’s what we call them. They were—Phillip was born in [19]5—he was born ’54. I have a nice little rubric here. Pam was born in ’56. Jimmy was born in ’58. And Bill was born in ’63. I think I was busy going to school there or something.

1:05:47 Schools that Skates taught at

Dombrowski Uh, where— which schools did you teach at? You taught at Geneva.

Skates I taught at Geneva. That was my first assignment. Well, I went to Southside, which is a school in Sanford right near my home— was where I did my internship, and that’s where my kids went to school. And that’s an old—that was— when I bought my house, that was the best school in Sanford. And that’s the reason I bought that house. It’s now been turned into— what did they call it? A nursing home. Golden Years nursing home. It’s a lovely school. It’s built in a

square and in the center is an atrium. And all the classrooms are built around the atrium. And down in the basement is the lunchroom, and up a little flight of stairs in the auditorium. It was a very nice plan for a school, but it's a nice plan for a nursing home, I guess. But they closed the school, because they built new schools and whatever. But my kids got to go through that, which I was glad for that. At least the two oldest ones did. And then the other two came with me to Geneva. What was the question?

Dombrowski Oh. Which schools have you taught at?

Skates Oh, and then I went, I was at Goldsboro [Elementary School. This was a good thing. When I left Geneva, and I had gotten my Master's in Exceptional Education, and I wanted to teach learning disabled children. And the principal at Geneva, for his own reasons, said he wasn't going to have a special ed[ucation] class. Well, it wasn't true, but that's what he told me. So I had this Pell Grant that I had used to get my Master's, that if I taught at a [Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965] Title I school, which I don't know if you know that means now, but it was a school that had more free lunches than any other school or something like that. So the principal at Goldsboro called me and he said, "If you come and teach the learning disabled children at Goldsboro," he said, "I can sign off on your student loan." So I spent two years there and signed off all that my Master's cost me. I mean, I had not paid for—he would sign off the loans—the superintendent would sign it off...

Dombrowski So they would pay for it.

Skates So they paid for it. So that was very good. I don't know if that's what you call a Pell Grant. I've forgotten. But I taught there two years and then the principal from Idyllwilde called and said they had a new wing opening up. They call it the E Wing—Exceptional Ed. Wing. And would I come out and do their SLD [Specific Learning Disabilities] classes. I said, "Oh, yes." So that's where I was when I retired.

Dombrowski Okay.

Skates That was good. I—those were good years. They were all good years.

1:09:01 **Closing remarks**

Dombrowski Well, good. Those are all the questions and topics that I have. Is there anything else you'd like to speak to that we haven't?

Skates I don't know. I think I'm probably boring you.

Dombrowski [laughs] Well, no. This is a good time.

Skates Now, how are they going to work this? Are they going to have a library?

Dombrowski Yeah, I think I'll just...

Skates Right.

End of Interview