

Pede, Miriam

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
MIRIAM PEDE

Interviewee: \*\*\*\*\*

Date: July 22, 2016

Place: Heritage Museum and Cultural Center

Transcribed by: \*\*\*\*\*

**Interviewer: First, can you tell me a little bit about yourself. First, your full name.**

Miriam Jean Biostock Pede

**Interviewer: And then, what is your birth date?**

My birth date is July 13, 1925.

**Interviewer: Okay, and where were you born?**

I was born in Alton, Illinois.

**Interviewer: Where did you attend college and what was your major?**

I received my teaching certificate from Albion College—is where I attended and graduated from and had a double major. I majored in history and I majored in English.

**Interviewer: How did you come to Saint Joseph?**

And so I had a total assignment of English there in Greenville. And I was there for a year and then learned of a position here in Saint Joseph and in the fall of 1950 then I came to Saint Joe and began my teaching career here.

Interviewer:

I taught here in Saint Joe for 27 years and retired in 1977. I met my husband here. We were married in the fall of 1953.

**Interviewer: What was your first impression of the community?**

My grandfather owned a farm out on Territorial. So we would come and visit though I never lived in Benton harbor, but we would---there were family reunions. So, I sort of knew the area. So then an aunt and uncle lived in the area and the aunt said ‘why do you want to go to Saint Joe? That’s just a sleepy little town on the hill’. Well it was because Benton Harbor was the thriving place. There was a bus service between Benton Harbor and Saint Joe. I still didn’t have a car—I mentioned that earlier that it never dawned on me that I might own a car. So when I first came, of course I wasn’t married. So I would get on the bus and go over to Benton Harbor and that’s where all of the dress shops and gift shops—everything. JCPenny was there Mescamins was there. Well, eventually when the Fairplain Plaza was built, that took a lot of Benton Harbor merchants out to Fairplain which took a heart and soul out of Benton Harbor.

**Interviewer: In my research, I found that you were President of the Federation of Women’s Club. Are you still their current President?**

I had always been interested in history and when I was teaching, in the summer’s I could be a guide at the Morton House Museum. And when I retired, I had been talking to the lady who was in charge of the guides over there that when I was retiring from teaching, I wanted something to do. So, I had spouted off of this. I needed something to fill in. Well, as soon as she heard that I had retired, she invited me to her house for a cup of coffee and she presented the opportunity to be in charge of the guides at the Morton House Museum. Well, that meant securing the guides and there were a number of them. And also annual training session and then we were open two days a week over there as a museum and I had to have people there and there had to be two people because if someone was upstairs, taking someone through the museum, there needed to be someone by the door. So, I did that. Well, after the cup of coffee with this friend, I came home to my husband and I said ‘I can’t turn her down as far as taking this responsibility after all of my

spouting off about the fact that I needed something to do when I retired. Well, I successfully did that for a number of years and enjoyed it. We weren't overrun with visitors, but it was nice.

**Interviewer: Can you tell me some history of the Morton House Museum?**

The Morton family were a leading family in Benton Harbor going back to when the first family came from the east in 1835. There were four generations of this family that contributed to life in Benton Harbor. The fourth generation did not outlive the third generation. And the third generation was Stanley and Kerry Morton who had these two sons—they had four children, but two reached adult hood. But they died as fairly young men. Stanley was known for being involved with the Graham and Morton Transportation Company. So when the children did not outlive the parents, Stanley and Kerry willed their house to the Federation of Women's Clubs and Women's Clubs were very important to women back in that time.

Women as a rule were not in the work force. They were homebodies and many of them were not educated. So when they could belong to a club—that might be a literary club a study club of some kind. This helped them grow in their lives as mothers and intellectually. Many times the clubs they belonged to was a good asset to their husbands standing in the community. And so there were as many I think at one time as 24 or 25 different clubs—women's groups in the twin cities. It finally became a Saint Joe-Benton Harbor Federation of Women's Clubs.

Now it no longer exists because women have gone into the workforce. Garden clubs seem to exist. One of our clubs had been the questers group. That's still in existence, but the clubs are not as important to women as they once were. So then after my husband died, from having been in charge of the guides then I did become and was president of the Federation of Women's Clubs for about two terms—six years. In that time we realized that the Federation was growing weaker

all the time in the sense that clubs were just going out of existence. And we began to think of what we should do to the Morton House.

The Federation of Women's Clubs wanted a club house. And so when they received the Morton House they sold off, must have had a sale, all the personal things furniture and all of the Morton House.

It was a good experience and the Federation did a very fine job in the 1960s is when they made—decided not to be a clubhouse any longer. As a clubhouse they rented the building out for weddings receptions, recitals and things like that. And then there were other places available and they were not getting all of that quote business. So they were struggling a bit to keep up the house. Oh, and they had painted the woodwork green and you know it was just—it didn't look like a home. So then in the 1960s there was a little group that thought since this is the oldest house in Benton Harbor and since the Morton family were very much leaders in the community, why not make it into a museum, which is how it all began as the museum.