Iowa Annie Wittenmyer Home
Oral History Project

Interviewer: This is Jan Nahra, interviewer for the Annie Wittenmyer Project, interviewing Dorothy Rynott who was the Nurse Supervisor in the Children's Hospital. Dorothy, please tell me how you became to know the position that you worked at in the hospital. How did you start there?

Mrs. Rynott: Well, after my husband died in 1952, I was left with two children and had been a registered nurse and realized that it would be necessary for me to go back to work and so the position of Director of Nursing and of the health plan for the Annie wittenmyer Home was available and I was interviewed and obtained the position.

Interviewer: And what were your duties and responsibilities there?

Mrs. Rynott: My duties were many and my responsibilities were many. (Laughs) When I first went to the home there were approximately four hundred children there and the hospital and the hospital staff were responsible for the health care and for all of the medications and treatments that the children received and this was all done from the hospital building.

Interviewer: And didn't you tell me that you were responsible on setting up some of the procedures? Didn't you start some new procedures there?

Mrs. Rynott: Well, when I first went there they had had a registered nurse, and a very fine one, that had been there for, I think, thirty years and then she died and because she had been ill, many of the things needed to be started as a program and recorded. For instance, immunizations, eye examinations, physicals, to see that these children were well taken care of and in good health. So we did start, as I say, taking care of the health. We had a doctor who came twice a week. He was a local pediatrician and he came to the hospital twice a week and saw any children we had who were ill and examined any new admissions in the hospital and we started our program from that. And then we carried out all the things that needed to be done to assure that the children were given every opportunity to have the best care possible while they were living at the Annie Wittenmyer Home.

Interviewer: And what was the age--I know that when we were talking there was an age, uh, of children, babies that had to stay in the hospital and weren't able to go in the bungalows. Can you tell me?

Mrs. Rynott: Yes. When I first went there all children four years of age and under, lived in the hospital. This was from newborn babies and at that time the Annie Wittenmyer Home was the largest adoption center in the state. All the babies and all the children that were under four years of age lived in different wards in the hospital. And we had them numbered, like the babies were in what was called C nursery and we had a little older ones in A and B and then on the top floor we had the brain-damaged children, the ones that were unable to live without close supervision and we had a different staff for that on the top floor of the hospital building.

Interviewer: Uh-hum, okay. Um, could you just tell me, I know we talked about this before, but tell me a little bit about your work experience, uh, before coming to the home. I know that you had worked in a hospital before that, before coming to Davenport.

Mrs. Rynott: Yes, um, well, before I came to live in Davenport I lived in Des Moines. And I was the Supervisor and Instructor of Pediatric Nursing at Methodist Hospital in Des Moines and I remained there until I moved to Davenport. And, uh, I had of course had my nurse's training and become an RN and then after coming to Davenport and after the death of my husband I went
back to Augustana College in Rock Island and received my Bachelor's of Science in Nursing.

Interviewer: And I think that you told me that you had always been with the children's situation in nursing, is that correct?

Mrs. Rynott: Yes, after--of course, when I was in nurse's training I was in all aspects of nursing. But I knew almost immediately, at least after the first year, that I wanted to work with children, that I felt this was where I would be best suited and I loved children. So I made up my mind that when I finished training I would want to be in a pediatric situation. And of course that is what I did. I specialized in--I went to Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago. I was out with the Infant Welfare Society of Chicago and then I went to Methodist from there, my first job, and all the time I was there I worked with nothing but children.

Interviewer: So that's just been kind of you natural background.

Mrs. Rynott: Yes, I wouldn't say I didn't like adults, I did. But I loved working with children.

Interviewer: Just felt more of a calling for children.

Mrs. Rynott: It was more of a calling for children and I just enjoyed working with them.

Interviewer: Can you tell me, uh, while you were at Annie Wittenmyer, can you tell me a little bit about a typical day, like your morning, afternoon and evening.

Mrs. Rynott: I guess no day was exactly typical at the Annie Wittenmyer Home. I went to work at seven o'clock in the morning and we had three shifts, the seven to three shift and the three to eleven and the eleven to seven shift. And uh, these employees were all part of the staff that worked at all times at the hospital, not at any other part of the grounds. And one of the things that I was always looking for when we were hiring for the hospital, the motherly type. The majority of the staff had had children of their own or did have children of their own and I wanted them to like children and to care for children and be able to relate to children. We started our day at seven. The children had their breakfasts and then we had what we called an outpatient clinic. The children from the grounds came to the hospital and if a child had eardrops, we put eardrops in, if they had some kind of medication, the medications were all given from the hospital. At that time they were not in the cottages at all and they would be given their medications, their treatments, whatever needed to be done for the children was done at the hospital. And then one of the things that we tried to do everyday, and I think most every day we did do, the children that could go outdoors, the staff member that was in charge of that nursery, they would get them dressed and they would go out for a walk and they'd walk up and down the things and they'd sometimes play on the slides and we tried to give them something besides just the hospital setting. I would say that I believe most of the children in the hospital were very happy children and that the staff was a very good staff. The children in C nursery were the babies and of course everybody liked to work with babies and they had to have total care. The nurses that worked in there or the aides that worked in there, they were again what I would call "special." They had to have a certain something or I wanted them to have a certain something that was like everyday picking up a baby and holding it in their arms and not just changing its diaper and putting it back in the crib--holding it or talking to it or doing something to help this baby develop. We had many, many, many babies and of course one of the most rewarding things, I suppose, about the home was that the children that lived in the hospital were adopted out from the hospital. They were not taken to the main building. And of course I had the privilege of being there, and when the parents came to get the children, talking to them and telling them about the children and the formulas and whatever I could to help them. And this was a very pleasant part of me job, something that I enjoyed tremendously. We always, all of the staff when someone was going to be adopted out, we were all looking at them very carefully to be sure if we though they were going to be good enough for
this baby. So it was a wonderful experience to work with the babies as well as the older children until they reached the age of four. I think then we had a typical day, they had a naptime, they had a lunch and then they maybe went for another walk or they played in the wards and then the doctors called on certain days. All of our doctors came to the hospital. For instance, all children eyes were examined from the smallest to the oldest while they were there. If they were going to have eye examinations they opthamologist came to the hospital. And I would say that we had some of the finest in the city for the children. And whatever they children needed they were given as far as expert care with experienced doctors and people that cared for children.

Interviewer: And whereas you already mentioned how caring you wanted your hired nurses to be, can you tell me, and I am assuming that there was a good feeling between the employees there and yourself. I mean it sounds like--did they work well together as a team?

Mrs. Rynott: Yes, they did and if they didn't, they were not there very long. But the primary thing that I was looking for was someone that liked children and loved children and generally had children of their own. I did have some young ones, but they had been usually from families where there were children and they had cared for them in their homes. And I would say that the staff worked very well together. I'm sure they weren't always pleased with some of my decisions, but they were very amiable and it was really a happy setting. I think that all of the staff that worked in the hospital, that's where they wanted to be.

Interviewer: Did you have a social time with the employees, just the employees, away from the hospital? I mean did they have different activities where they employees got together?

Mrs. Rynott: No, they did not. The life of the hospital--when they were there they were working and then they went home. Now I do know that the girls on the different shifts sometimes would have a potluck, you know, and they'd each bring something and they'd have potluck. But the idea was, when you were at the hospital you were with the children and you spent your time with the children. And, uh, they were good friends and I'm sure they did things together away from the hospital, but as far as--they had coffeebreaks, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, but as far as socializing, I--

Interviewer: After hours or anything? As a group, did you have picnics or anything of that nature?

Mrs. Rynott: No, we did not. It was strictly a hospital setting, just like in the main hospitals.

Interviewer: Uh, hum. And did you have contact with the people in the cottages?

Mrs. Rynott: Did we have what?

Interviewer: Contact with the people in the cottages?

Mrs. Rynott: Oh, yes. In fact, when the children came for their treatments, some of them were not big enough to come by themselves, as they lived in the cottages. And some of them were not able to come by themselves and then a staff member from the cottage would come and bring the child and stay with them until they were through with the treatment or whatever had to be done and then take them back to the cottages.

Interviewer: Have you kept in contact with any of the residents that you had in the hospital or in the cottages?

Mrs. Rynott: Well, yes, I've had--it's kind of narrowed off the last few years because, you see, that was a long time ago. At first, it was interesting, the children would be adopted and then
maybe in a year the people who had adopted the children would come back to the hospital and they would be quite hurt maybe because we wouldn't recognize little Mary Jane and little Mary Jane had changed completely in this time. But we were always glad to see them and we did have contact with the children who lived in the cottages and I had many children that called me at home and did come back to see me. Sometimes they weren't always the ones that--you'd be surprised at the ones that came back. We had one young man that had been in Iowa City Hospitals. He had been returned from California because he had what they called needle hepatitis. He had been into drugs and so he developed some liver damage. He came to the Iowa Wittenmyer Home to recuperate. So he lived in the hospital for quite some time as a patient. He was sixteen years old. And, uh, we became very good friends. And I have to say that he taught me all I know about drugs, really. He was very knowledgeable and he had been in the midst of the California drug scene and he would come to my office very often and would tell me about the different drugs, which, of course, I had very little knowledge of at this time. The doctor, one of the pediatricians, tried to get him to go before some of the school classes, the high school classes, and tell them. He was too shy to do this, he would not do it. He spent his sixteenth birthday with us and I remember so clearly his having to be there for his birthday and I had the kitchen bake a birthday cake for him. Not all of the staff approved of this because they thought he was an odd guy, but he was quite charming and we baked the cake and I remember when we went in and we sang "Happy Birthday" to him, he said, "This is the first birthday cake I have ever had in my life." And it was deeply touching, because it was the first birthday cake he had ever had. This boy, after he left the home, he came back to see me several times. Sometimes he would bring his friends with him. I was always glad to see him and he always had something of interest to tell me and something that I should remember about drugs, you know, in dealing with children that were having difficulties. And so we did have contact. I had lots and lots of children that came back to see me, came back to my house. One time when I was there one of the girls ran away and we didn't know where she was, she ran away. And when I got home that night, she was at my house.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh!

Mrs. Rynott: And so, of course, she was returned. She was a nice girl, she just didn't want to be there so she'd gone away. We had lots of experiences with the children that were very touching and showed how much they needed someone that cared and would be able to understand some of their problems.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. You just told me, before we started recording, the story about Toby?

Mrs. Rynott: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Would you mind repeating that, because I thought that was an endearing story.

Mrs. Rynott: Yes. Yes, Uh, we had a little boy, I think he was probably about seven, and um, he was a little rascal. He was always getting into everything, but a nice child. And uh, one day he was over where they load the coal and he got his--somehow, I don't know how, he got his foot in the coal loader. It just took off his shoe and it took off his big toe at the same time. Apparently there wasn't anyone around at the time. And so several of his friends just kind of picked him up bodily and brought him over to the hospital. And he came in and I was of course quite shocked and uh, I said, "Oh, Tony, where is your toe?" And uh, he wasn't unconscious or anything. The tow was just gone. And the other children said, "Oh, we'll get it for you, Mrs. Kelly, we'll get it for you." So I was busy calling the doctor and getting sterile dressings around the foot. And we were getting ready to go to the doctor and I happened to go with him that day and um, in came the boys and they came over and slapped down into my hand the toe. And they said, "Here's Tony's toe, Mrs. Kelly!" And so I got a sterile dressing--I'm not sure that that did any good at that stage. We went off to the doctor's office and the doctor was a very, very fine man and you know
he sewed the toe back on. I couldn't believe it as I watched him doing it. I kept thinking, "How could this be?" He sewed the toe back on and then he was transferred to University Hospitals to be sure everything was all right. Then he returned to us and the toe took. And we were all amazed. But it did, it took, and everything went along well. About six to eight weeks later Tony came in to my office one morning and he said, "Mrs. Kelly, you know they're giving ballet lessons over in the chapel. Could I take ballet lessons?" I said, "You want to take ballet lessons?" And he said, "Yes, I do." And I said, "Well yes, Tony, if you think you can do it, you do it." And so he went off. I don't know how long they lasted, not too long, I'm sure. But he made a nice recovery. He never walked as well as he had before, but uh, he did very well. I've always followed him with great fondness.

Interviewer: And you said that the children brought him to the hospital. Were any adults with him at that time that the children brough him in?

Mrs. Rynott: No, there was no one right there when this thing happened. They were playing there, see, they probably shouldn't have been playing there, but they were playing up by the coal loader. So four or five of them just picked him up—he was a little, not very big fellow. He was probably limping on one leg and they just carried him over to the hospital. But those children very often survive much better than the children that have been very protected.

Interviewer: And kind of took care of one another.

Mrs. Rynott: Yes, yes, oh yes, they did and we had so many things happen. We had one little boy that had an artificial eye and he was always losing his eye. And the kids would come in and they'd say, "Here's his eye." And we'd clean it up and put it back in again. They're very hardy little fellows.

Interviewer: Apparently so! I guess one of the questions I have here and I think you've really answered it, but if you could, what did you like most about working at the home.

Mrs. Rynott: I liked most working at the home because I was working with children and I was working with children that needed so much. Uh, they used to use the term--so many of their parents--many of the parents loved the children very much and they wanted to go home, they always did want to go home. But they were what we termed inadequate parents. They just didn't seem to know how to do these things or to manage the children. And these children needed so much and I suspect the thing they needed the most was love and people that cared what happened to them. And I think that the thing that I liked most was because I was working with children. I guess I would have to be honest and say I wouldn't have particularly liked to have worked in the cottages, but the hospital, I loved it because they were so dependent on you and you just knew that they needed you, even in the patient's section. When they would be admitted as patients in the patient's section, these children needed so much.

Interviewer: You did that nurturing, obviously, that you gave them, that you and your staff gave them.

Mrs. Rynott: And the staff. The staff were very, very good and that is something that they should have been complimented on often because the staff---. And one of the things they would do, up in the brain-damaged unit, they would take them home with them. The staff members would take them home and maybe they would go home and bake cookies or do things like this with them. Or they'd take them to the park or they'd do things like this. They were always taking--the children in the hospital we couldn't let go, but they children up in the brain-damaged unit were older children and there was a real attachment to the staff and they were so good to them. And often took them--when I say took them home, I don't mean to stay, but they would take them home to bake cookies and then they'd bring them back before bedtime.
Interviewer: For an outing. Above and beyond.

Mrs. Rynott: Uh-huh. And they would go on picnics and things like that. Yes, they gave much of themselves to the children, which was very important.

Interviewer: Oh, yes. And how were you paid, by check, or cash?

Mrs. Rynott: How was I paid? I was paid by check every month.

Interviewer: By check, once a month. Okay. And did you have to sign any kind of agreement or contract or anything of that nature? Can you remember?

Mrs. Rynott: Oh, when I went to work there? No, I did not. I had no contract. I interviewed with the director of the Annie Wittenmyer Home and they hired me and I didn't sign anything.

Interviewer: Did they ever give you any kind of--you know, this day and age they have evaluations.

Mrs. Rynott: Oh yes, we had evaluations. I evaluated the staff in the hospital and the director of Annie Wittenmyer Home evaluated me and we were given these evaluations. As I remember it was done about every six months I think. And it was a rather complete evaluation of our strong points and our weak points, where we needed to do better--oh yes, we were all evaluated.

Interviewer: I see. Well one of the questions too, and just from the way that you talk about it, I know it's been very positive, but can you tell me what your best memories are. And I'm sure that's a loaded question 'cuz you had so many, but you've already said seeing the babies, the children adopted was a great feeling.

Mrs. Rynott: A great reward. When we would see these children adopted, we hated to see them go, we hated to lose them. But we were so happy and we always had them all dressed up and they looked so cute. The staff members were proud of them and the babies of course I suppose would be an outstanding thing that I would remember. I know I remember one particular family that adopted twins and it was so very touching because they obviously were so overwhelmed with taking twins and they were so right for the children. Through the years they have kept in touch with me. The children now are married, have families of their own and I think the, most of the children that were adopted, they had good homes and were brought up well and I hope they were. And I don't know how many black babies you have seen, but black babies are so precious. They are just so darling and when they would be placed it would be such a joy to see them have parents that were going to care for them. And of course the children on the grounds and the ones that lived in the hospital of course our aim was to either return them to their own family, if it could be worked out, or for them to have a foster home or rather than a foster home a real placement. But we wanted them not to have to live in a setting of an institution all of their life.

Interviewer: Well Dorothy, I want to thank you for giving me your time. One last question, if there is anything that you would like to add, feel free to do so.

Mrs. Rynott: Well, I would really like to add that, um, after losing my husband and having my children to raise and educate, I would have to say that some of the best years of my life, most rewarding years, were spent at the Annie Wittenmyer Home. I've been very grateful for the experience of it and the understanding. It just seemed like it was all easier because I was working with children and it was some of the best years of my life.
Interviewer: Thankyou.