

Mabel Christofersen.
Inanda teacher, 1946–1980.
Interviewed in Durban, 9 December 2008.

You grew up at the Ifafa Station on the South Coast—could you begin by telling me a bit about your family background and how they were involved with the American Board, and about some of your childhood experiences?

My parents came out in wartime, 1914/1915 era, and sailed via Canary Islands here... and first of all, they were situated at Maphumulo to study language... Then they moved on to Ifafa Mission... Ifafa Mission is away from any transport at all, and when Mother wanted to go to meetings, they had to go via horseback to the local station which was four miles away... We all grew up at Ifafa Mission, I was born in 1921 and lived there until I was 18. The first time we went over to the States I was a toddler... I don't remember anything about that trip at all... Then we went again when I was about nine, and we went into school there, and it was very strange. We actually went to two schools, one was in Naperville, Illinois, that's where my mother's people were, then we had to come back to Auburndale, to the Missionary Home there, for our parents' visits to churches, and I remember going some of the places with my parents, but not very many, because Mother stayed at home with us most of the time. There was rather an enclave there of missionary children and their parents, so we were rather contained within the mission premises there. And then we came back to South Africa and we were there 'til eighteen, Mother kept teaching us. For the first years we were taught Mother was registered as a farm school, so at the end of the school year we would quickly learn how to use South African money—pounds, shillings, and pence—because the rest of the time we used American money in our school work, so we could take the tests at the local white school, which was rather funny. We knew both of them, but we usually worked with American money in our schoolwork... The rest of the time we followed Mother around because she wouldn't stop her work, we just had to follow her around and know our lessons well enough to recite them; she didn't ask us questions, we recited our lessons. Whether she was hoeing in the garden or baking or whatever, we followed her... In the afternoon we played... We had a big garden down the hillside where we grew pumpkins, mealies, amadumbe, and we had the kitchen garden where we had vegetables... My father found an old dam up the valley... so we did have water piped to the middle of the big garden, otherwise we had tank water... Then when I was eighteen, we were still—four of us—there, my sister June had stayed at the Mission Home when she was fourteen, they had a lot of children there who stayed while their parents went back...

So your whole family went to the States when you were eighteen.

Yes, that's right.

Did you go to University in the States, or did you come back here?

No, we went to high school and I had two years of high school. And my brother Howard was put forward so he also had two years of high school... but it was very difficult—we didn't know the sports heroes, the film stars, well we just didn't know the language of the high school.

And you were eighteen!

Yes, I was eighteen. Then we went to the local college there, in Naperville, North Central College... Then the war came on, and both of my brothers went into the—oh, I forget what it was called—the Navy program, the Army program, so they were sent to other colleges and their education was taken care of. So we had to sell our house... I stayed in the homecraft dorm.

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Then you went to Inanda Seminary in 1946, right?
Yeah.

So how did you come to choose Inanda? Did you go anywhere else in South Africa before coming there?
No, I wanted to go there. I wanted to come back to South Africa, there was an opening there, so I finally got a possibility to travel... I taught in what was at that time called the Industrial School, which really was a homecraft school. It was a three-year school and I was teaching sewing in the first year. Knitting...

What were your first impressions of Inanda—the campus, staff, students?
I can't remember [laughs]... It was of course very different from American schools, and I was not used to South African schools either... The students were quite different, in the fact that they wanted to learn, so it was very easy to teach them, but it was hard to stop them from speaking Zulu, which at that time we had the rule that during school days we had to speak English, so they got used to it, so that was difficult, but other than that they wanted to learn, so that was easy... Of course, my learning how to teach was difficult [laughs].

Then you were head of the Industrial School two years later.
Was it as soon as that? Very soon, too soon it was. I don't think I did a very good job because I didn't know what I was supposed to do. We changed then, too, from a three-year school, and I started teaching part of the time in the high school, teaching homecraft—cooking and a little bit of housewifery, mostly cooking, and I moved on to the more advanced sewing and knitting. So I kept on in that way.

Did most of your students use their homecraft skills in their own homes, or did they go into domestic service?
Well, we originally were training them for domestic service, and there was quite an emphasis on organizing your work around serving, you know, with the cooking you had to learn how to serve a whole meal and how to set up a table... Then of course there was the laundry, but that was a separate class... I didn't do very much of that because by the time I taught cooking there that was not in it, we had given up our little flat. We had a little flat there in the Industrial Building, a kitchen, a dining room, and a bedroom, and the senior class had to run that as a home... But that had stopped before I arrived. We were trying to do it more towards somebody using their skills for their own use, but the skills for the sewing went into things you could do for other people, it could be adapted for that. But we didn't do anything... for starting a business.

Do you remember what sorts of careers your students went into?
I don't know. Most of them I think just got married. And gradually our department got smaller and smaller, because they [IS] got more academic, and that's why I moved into the high school. And in the end I moved into administration, to matron and part-time teaching.

When did you make that transition?
When I went back after I was—I was out, you see—I was overseas, and when I came back they didn't want me anymore. I went to a white school.

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That was in the 1960s?

Yeah. We went overseas...

And what white school did you teach at?

St. Mary's in Kloof, taught the little ones, but it was part-time teaching, and I was supposed to be learning Afrikaans then, which I never could do. I don't know, I guess I couldn't concentrate enough then, so I didn't learn it.

Then when did you return to Inanda?

From Kloof I moved up to Bulwer for two years, then they called me back to Inanda Seminary as one of the matrons, and I was supposed to teach—what did they call it—not shorthand, but quick writing, very much like SMS... They found that proper shorthand would be impossible, with pronunciation.

And what did you do as matron?

Well, it involved seeing to it, overseeing the meals of the staff, overseeing some of the campus care, and sleeping in the Secretarial School's dormitory. So I was on duty 9-12. And during that time I took over the task of running an after school sewing class as a hobby class. During my teaching I was also the Torchbearers Captain— it was the senior Girl Guides.

So what did the Torchbearers do?

We learned all—to do the badges. Then one day I took them down to Ifafa Mission, and we had a week down there of fun...

When did you retire from Inanda?

Must have been 1969 [sic, 1979]. Then I came to Durban and soon got a job with the Young Women's Christian Association, as what they called their Field Secretary, working with the coloured community down in Sydenham...

Going back a bit, what was the impact of apartheid and Bantu Education on Inanda Seminary—on daily life, on school governance?

Well, it made it more difficult. I remember taking one of our teachers back to KwaMashu, and we were supposed to get permission from the authorities when we went into KwaMashu... I went there the first time and they gave me permission. The next time I went there were no officials there, so after that I never bothered, I just went in and took her home... I remember all the people would stare at us as we came in. I never remained there, I would go in and come right out... It was rather a hostile feeling—you never knew when you would get caught in the wrong place.

In terms of the students that Inanda was attracting, did you see any change between the 1940s and the 1960s, say in the caliber of the students?

Definitely when I went back as a matron there were some that were beginning to be interested in politics at that time. And I know we had problems with one girl sneaking away, going away to some sort of political meeting... but at the time she snuck back, the principal was busy with something else and didn't investigate, so she was never caught... I know earlier on we had had one

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student that came—she was heiress of a tribe, and she didn't want to come to school, she did not want to learn. And then I know towards the end we had one of Mandela's daughters. She was given special attention. I didn't have her, she was in the high school, but she was tutored specially. Zindzi, I think it was. She was there for only one year, and it was as a special student. But it got harder to discipline the girls, because they were no longer going there because they were struggling to get to school, and they knew that their parents, usually their mother, was working very hard to keep them there—it was very different from the later years when they got more contact with Durban. And I was in charge part of the time of the tuck shop, and I know that some of them had far, far too much pocket money to spend, and that was very poor because the contrast between the two lots was very big. Some of them were just on the edge of staying there, and others had fifty Rand pocket money... And then, too, we had more problems with them wanting different food... So that was more difficult, with the feeding. And the fact that they were more interested in what was happening outside of the school, with the country. We were of course in the middle of apartheid, and some of their people were being hounded by the powers that be. They didn't know when they would be getting bad news.

So Inanda was the only Protestant school for black women in South Africa at that time.

And during that time Adams College had to give up and become a government school... Earlier on we had been very separate, the only school we had contact with was Ohlange Institute. I remember one of the first months I was there we, the whole school, walked to Inanda—I think that was for Dube's funeral, that was quite a thing... Then, later on, we had, when they got girls, athletic duels with them. Then in later years we had inter-school athletics once a year, and it was quite a farce, because we only started athletics a couple of months before the program... But it was an outing, and the girls liked it, because they could see all sorts of people. We had our own athletics competitions, we had competitions between the four houses. Then, as I say, we would go to Ohlange to compete with the girls there... Then in the end, there was an Indian school that used to come and spend the day with us, and that was quite something to have that... That was quite a step forward, I would say [laughs], and they did enjoy it, and they mixed quite well.

Why, in your opinion, was Adams refused permission to stay open while Inanda continued?

Because we were only girls. That was the one reason. And some of the politicians thought the word 'liberal,' as in 'liberal' education at Adams College, was political... It was a foregone conclusion in their minds that it had to go [laughs]. I do know that when it was turned over to them, the powers that be that were there then did their best to-to-to talk badly about the missionaries, and they changed all the names on the houses so it couldn't reflect the missionaries... they did their best to, as they say, give the missionaries a bad name [laughs]. Which of course they couldn't entirely do.

So you worked with Lavinia Scott, and then with a few others. What were their leadership styles like?

Dr. Scott was a very friendly and democratic leader. Basically, very human. And Aylard was more authoritative, and he wanted everything new, he didn't want the old things—he was responsible for getting rid of the [original] desks which had been brought overland from Port Elizabeth. And he had five boys which didn't help [laughs]... What with them and the Zondi boys, it was a little bit too much. It was quite different under Aylard. Of course, by then we were harassed by

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Government to do things in Government ways, and of course the Mission was having a hard time because of the apartheid, there were things that were happening, there were problems with the fact that we as a mission supported prisoners' families, and that backlashed onto us a bit, and the fact that money was not forthcoming. Though Aylard was the one that called me back, he was not such an easy one to work under as Lavinia was. With Lavinia you felt you were working together, with Aylard it wasn't quite the same. Zondi was different. [Pauses] I don't remember too much about it. But then when the other one came, it was finished for me.

'The other one' was Mrs. Koza?

[Laughs.] Yeah, I found out too many things about her which were wrong, and she decided the girls liked me better than they liked her, and so I was out!

In what ways did the government 'harass' Inanda during Aylard's time and after?

Well, it was mainly money matters and you had to follow a certain—we were all supposed to know Afrikaans, and that was one of the hardest things. And they wouldn't give—they gave us a certain length of time to learn, or they wouldn't subsidize teachers' salaries, which made it difficult... Also, the numbers in the classes were different than what we wanted.

There was no government support at all.

Yes, but I don't remember if there was some for boarding... earlier than that, of course, they wanted to close Inanda Seminary, during the Depression, and that was when McCord separated from the Mission, and he got an independent group to organize it, because Dr. McCord said no, we mustn't close Inanda Seminary... Our salaries were not good. And that made it difficult to get good teachers. We couldn't give the same conditions that the government did. I never did get anything from the Government. My brother tried to talk them into it... anyhow. He gave me a pension instead, so I'm all right. Not flush, flush. I do know that—and you know that too—we gave our students the ability to *think* on their own more, we didn't just teach them by rote. And that's what's helped them to go on to more lucrative and more meaningful work than what some other schools taught them. So that when they went into University, it was easier for them than for some. Not that it's easy, but it's easier for them than for some, because they had been taught to work out problems themselves and find information that they needed.

I was talking to one woman who went to Inanda in the late 1960s and said that her curriculum at Inanda was harder than that which she encountered at the University of Zululand in the early 1970s. She was a little disappointed.

[Laughs.] Their science, they made them work hard on their sciences. Their history, too. They didn't just have to spout back whatever we said to them. Which is what the white schools were doing at that time, and the African schools too, it was... The fact that we gave individual attention where it was needed too was a different thing for a high school, because if there was somebody that—I can remember Florence Goba who was teaching English in the first class that entered. She would work with them, and work with them, and work with them, and so did Miss Ngobozi who was in English. And that first class, they would really work hard with them... As well as in the senior classes, where it was 'Find your own answers!' I think that was the main thing that made a difference to them, that we didn't just give them all the answers...