The Memoirs of

Edith Mary DeForest

45 Years of Service to Pratt, Read & Company, Inc.

Edith began work one week after this photo - July 8, 1937

Edith at her retirement party - June 30, 1982

2009 - Edith at the Stone House Museum
Edith Mary DeForest was born in the Plantsville section of Southington, Connecticut on December 16, 1915, the youngest child of William Sylvester DeForest and Mary Ellen Donoghue DeForest.

Edith’s parents, William and Mary Ellen were married November 3, 1902. They had a son, and three daughters:

- William Miles [b. 1903-d.1981]
- Lillian Dorothy [b.1906-d.2005]
- Ethel Evelyn [b.1909-d.1998]
- Edith Mary [b.1915]

When she was not yet two years old, in 1917, they moved from Plantsville to New Haven, Connecticut. Her father was offered a job at Winchester Repeating Arms Company in the auger bit division. This was the trade that he and her grandfather, Sylvester DeForest, were employed in. They lived in a six apartment house, across from the factory and about 1921 moved to Thompson Street until 1929, when they moved to Sheffield Avenue into a house owned by Winchesters.

All this time her Poppa had been working in the bit division. When he got older, they moved him to be a night watchman until he got too old for that and they then moved to Starr Street, New Haven.

In 1935, June, Edith’s widowed paternal grandmother died. She had lived in the family homestead in Chester, Connecticut. Edith’s parents moved to the Chester house as it became her father’s upon his mother’s death.

Edith was then working for a lawyer and did not want to move to Chester, so she stayed in New Haven. Her father died in December, 1936 from pneumonia. He was only 62 but had a bad heart.

At that time, Edith was ordered by her siblings to come home (to Chester) to live as it was thought her mother (age 61) was too old to live alone. Again, she did not want to move and resisted and stayed in New Haven until July 1, 1937, when she moved to Chester.

Edith resides to this day in her ancestral home.
Foreword

Edith is Curator at the Stone House, home to the Deep River Historical Society. This is where we first became acquainted. I was researching the ‘Charter Oak’ piano, part of their collection, in 1979. Being in the piano industry for all of our adult lives, Edith would contact my husband or me, over the years, [or vice-versa] for information relating to pianos.

During a conversation with Edith earlier this year, she mentioned that she had prepared three tapes of her years at Pratt, Read & Company. Having an affinity with Pratt Read, and its history, I said that I would enjoy listening to the tapes and would be happy to transcribe them to paper so this history would be preserved.

My grandfather had worked for many years at Pratt, Read, and in fact it was the verification of his employment they supplied that allowed my British mother and me to come ahead to the United States from England while my father continued his service in the US Army during WWII.

It certainly was my privilege to type these words. From Edith’s voice, through the tape player into my ears and finally through my fingers to the page any errors are mine. On occasion I had to change a few words to make complete ‘writable’ sentences, as we don’t speak as we write. The loss in transcribing is the inflection of voice, the twinkle that is sure to be in Edith’s eye as she speaks, her lovely little chuckles, and the pauses when sadness overcomes her. You will need to imagine them.

Edith, thank you.

Vivian Ackerman Brooks
June, 2009
And now, Edith DeForest speaks to us through her tape recorder from her home in Chester, Connecticut:

Today is July 8, 1997. Sixty years ago yesterday on July 7, 1937 I went down to Pratt Read and Company in Deep River, and put in an application for preferably office work, but I would take factory work. The young lady who took my application was Roberta Blanchard. When I came home my brother drove me to Middletown to the Employment Office to put in an application there. On the way home we had a flat tire which delayed us. When we finally got home my Mother was real agitated. She had gotten a call from Pratt Read & Company and they wanted me down there immediately to talk to me.

So, my brother drove me down and I met Mr. Wilbur C. Holmes who was the office manager. I met Brainerd Smith who was one of the employees. I also met Peter H. Comstock and Alma J. Pearson, also employees. When I left [that day] I met Mr. Gould who was President of the Company.

The job that they had to offer was to operate the electric Remington-Rand bookkeeping machine. Brainerd was now operating it but they wanted someone else to do the payroll on it. The wages were $65.00 a month and I often said, jokingly, that I was so busy dividing four into $65.00 to see how much I was going to make a week that I didn’t know what I was getting into. But, that was just a joke.

I was told to report to work the next morning which would be July 8, 1937. This happened to be the day that they put up the payroll. Brainerd Smith and Mr. Edward Hilley had gone to the bank with the little black bag. The little black bag had a zipper compartment in it which contained the smoke bomb. When they carried the bag empty the lever would be off – ‘on safe’ but after they left the bank with all the money for the payroll they turned the lever to ‘on’ and that way if a crook grabbed the bag the smoke would come pouring out of the bag and they could trace him.

When Brainerd came back he asked Mr. Holmes who would help him put up payroll. Mr. Holmes suggested, “Why don’t we break Edith in on it.” So, with that Brainerd took me into this little room where this payroll machine was and he locked the door and then he turned and said, “I have to do that.” I don’t know whether he thought I was afraid he was going to attack me or what but we proceeded to count the money to make sure we had the proper amount. There was a change machine which held quarters, two slots for dimes, nickels, and pennies. The pay envelopes were little small coin envelopes, on which the person’s name, social security number and all his pay, the gross, the deductions for social security, the insurance, etc. and came up with the net pay.

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Then, Brainerd would take one pay envelope. He would count out the net pay. He would put it on the envelope and put it in front of me. I would recount it put it in the envelope and then into the box. Each department had a box to hold the pay envelopes. When we finished stuffing all of the pay envelopes, if we came out right, we would seal up the envelopes. They would then be put in the vault until Friday which was the day that they got paid.

We had to type up what they call a payroll summary. At that time Social Security had just gone into effect the first part of the year and those people who were 65 years of age and over did not pay any Social Security so part of the information that went on the payroll summary was the total of those people who were over 65 years of age. I was told that I had to add those up. Never having seen an adding machine, I didn’t know what they meant, but they led me over to this monstrosity. It was on an iron frame. It was a huge thing that had the full numbers across ‘zero up to nine’ and it had this handle on and you punched the figures in and crank went the handle. I learned a lot that day.

We were working in both areas – in Deep River and in Ivoryton. The Deep River payroll was the first one that was done and then Ivoryton was done. In Ivoryton, the head of maintenance man and the superintendent would come over to the office and gather up the boxes and go across the street to the factory to give out the payroll envelopes. In case someone came and held them up, the superintendent had a gun in his pocket and he would have it all ready to pull out and shoot the robber.

I gradually was learning how to use the payroll machine but Brainerd was going on vacation in August for two weeks. I hadn’t had that much experience on running it. I used to have signs hanging all over the registers to tell me to do this or do that, to remind me or do the next thing. While Brainerd was gone, I had to put up the payroll and I forget who had to sit there with me to put the money up in the envelopes but being inexperienced in using the change machine, I suddenly found out that whenever I had 45 cents in a pay I only got 35 cents. I called Mr. Holmes and told him that something was wrong that when I wanted 45 cents I only got 35 cents. Just about that time Mr. Gould went by the door and said, “Find out who made it and call him up.”

I suddenly discovered that there were two slots for dimes and one was empty and that was the reason that I was only getting the one dime instead of the two.

Brainerd was a coin collector, so when we were counting the money we would be looking at all the pennies to see if we could find certain ones. One penny that was very rare was a 1909 with an “nd” on it I believe. We were never lucky enough to find that.

While Brainerd was on vacation, Alma Pearson and Wilbur Holmes were putting up the payroll and they were having one hellava time with it. No one seemed to know how to denominate the envelopes and so they denominated the gross pay instead of the net pay and
that caused quite a problem. They had the petty cash in there and they were making change all over the place. When the payroll was all put up and they were trying to reconcile their petty cash, they weren't coming out right and one was blaming the other and there was some mess. I don't know what happened, but you always had to go over it if you were over a penny or under a penny. It didn't matter you had to go through and recount all of the pays to make sure they were all right.

I remember that there was a young man that worked in Ivoryton. His name was Walter Glidden and during the time that Brainerd was on vacation and Alma and Mr. Holmes put up the pay that Mr. Holmes said that it didn't matter if someone claimed that they were short either in Deep River or in Ivoryton, because they were not short, they came out right. Well, it seems that Mr. Glidden claimed that he was $10.00 short. Mr. Holmes was very adamant that he was not going to give the money to Mr. Glidden because he couldn't be short. But Mr. Gould came and said “Wilbur, you pay the man. He says he's short, he's short.” So Mr. Holmes could do nothing else but pay him and he was not a 'happy camper.'

One thing they told me was that if I had a habit of whistling, which I didn’t and couldn’t, don’t whistle around Mr. Holmes because he would throw you out of the place. Also, I met Mr. George Seeley. Mr. George Seeley was the son-in-law of Benjamin Harwood. He was married to one of Benjamin's twin daughters, Rica. Rica and he didn't live together, they lived separately. If Rica would arrive in Ivoryton...“Whoa, I am ahead of myself, I’ll finish that later.”

They told me that if I saw Mr. Seeley, to watch him closely because suddenly he would look at you with this stare on his face and this stupid grin. Boy, were they right. He always had that.

Brainerd among his other duties, used to deliver the mail around there. Back in those days they used comptometers. A comptometer was something that people used to go to school to learn how to use. It was a square metal box it had a full keyboard and ten rows of keys and the theory was that you used your fingers of both hands. If you were trying to add something up you would operate this with both hands. In the purchasing department we had a Mr. Treat from Middletown. One day he had his comptometer on the left hand side of him and he had a sheet of long figure that he was trying to add on the right hand side. Brainerd came in from the factory with the mail and he stood in the doorway. He slid a piece of mail for Mr. Treat across his desk, and low and behold it landed right square on top of the sheet that he was doing the adding from. There was a dead silence and then there was this, ‘God damn, Jesus Christ’ and nobody knew what happened, but with that Mr. Treat stood up came out of his office stood by Brainerd’s desk and said “God damn You, don’t you ever do that again.”

And Brainerd said “Do what?”
“Come in and throw a piece of paper over what I’m adding.” Mr. Treat was so mad, because he had to start all over again.

Ebba Anderson, she was the secretary. Just before Brainerd went on vacation, she decided to go on vacation. So they drafted me to do her duties as secretary. I had flunked junior shorthand when I was in high school. I had to repeat junior shorthand and just barely passed it and just barely passed senior shorthand. As a matter of fact, the teacher that taught shorthand told my mother that I could just forget it, that I would never make it in the business world. I often hoped that I could see that lady someday and maybe give her a Bronx cheer.

I was having a terrible time because Mr. Seeley was the one I worked for. I finally told him that I hadn’t had enough practice on running the bookkeeping machine, and with Brainerd going on vacation, I was going to be in serious trouble. They hired someone else temporarily to come and do Ebba’s work and they let me go back to learning the bookkeeping machine. I used to walk back down there from home after supper, just to get the work done because I was very slow at it.

Business got very slack and in the end of November, 1937, I was laid off along with some other people, Mr. Treat, Mr. Hilley and Mrs. Rockwell. I did not bother to go to the unemployment place because, in the first place I did not have enough money in it for them to pay me anything and I knew that they could not get along without me and they would be calling me back.

Sometime in December I happened to be out in the back yard and I looked up and here comes this raccoon coat with this man in it with a cookie cutter hat on his head. It turned out to be Peter Comstock.

He told me he had these two friends, Bruce and Sheridan Fahnestock and their mother Mary Worth and that they had just come back from a sail around the South Sea Islands and they wanted to write a book and they were looking for someone to do the typing of the transcript for them and he wondered if I would like to do it. I said, “Yes.”

Sheridan came and picked me up. We stopped in Prann’s in Deep River and rented a typewriter. They were staying at Commander Rowe’s house down in Essex; it’s called ‘Crosstrees.’ We started out. They had things written out but I was having a terrible time transcribing their handwriting, so we had them change to dictating it to me and then me doing the typing. I forget how much money I earned or how long a time I worked on it but I always thought that when the book was completed they might give me a copy. I never did get a copy. Peter did; he got an autographed copy.
The name of the book was *Stars to Windward*. They lived on Rackets Lane in Essex and when the war broke out; both boys went into the war. Bruce was lost in the South Pacific. I don’t know where Sheridan ended up.

On January 19, 1938, they recalled me back to work. I stayed until September 30, 1982 when I retired after 45 years of service with the exception of a month and a half.

In March of 1938 they decided to put the accounts receivable on the bookkeeping machine so Brainerd and I would be operating it together. The machine had what they called the tabulating bar. There was one bar for the payroll and one bar for the accounts receivable. There were all these different registers and each register had these 'cams' that dictated what the register was to do and what the function was. The only thing was that we only had one register to use for the debits and the credits. You would have to post all the debits first, then take the cam off the register, put a new cam on and move the register over into another position to do the credits. The only thing wrong was that half the time we forgot to change the cam. By the end of the month when they went to see what the accounts receivable came to it was one hellava mess. Alma and Mr. Holmes had to go back through all the posting to make sure it came out right. You can well imagine that they bought another register and made some other changes. I did accounts receivable from then on until the war in 1940. There were very little accounts receivable during the war, just for the gliders for the Navy and the Army.

In 1945 after the war I went back to doing payroll and accounts receivable until about 1954 when Brainerd Smith started doing it then. I continued on doing payroll until they sent out to have the payroll done. Shortly after that they went into data processing and in 1968 I was transferred to data processing to do nothing but payroll and was made a payroll accountant.

To introduce those who were there in 1938: Roberta Blanchard, she was a receptionist. Checkerboard Feed came to town and with it a young man named Miles Upson. He and Roberta hit it off and fell in love and wanted to get married. Her father was very very strict, so she was trying to keep it from him. She had her diamond ring she used to carry it in her purse, and every once in a while she would come into the room where I was doing payroll and put it on wear it around for a while. Eventually they did get married. They ran away to someplace in upper New York State and got married. They lived in one of the apartments on Main Street for several years.

The next person was Eva Bohling who did the billing. Eva suddenly let everybody know that she had been married to Lincoln Gilbert from Ivoryton, who she went to school with, for about three years. She was sprouting this big rock on her finger suddenly and poor Roberta felt
very unhappy when she looked at that and then at hers. To make her feel better, I told her the other one looked artificial.

Lillian Gesick worked with Eva. She was her helper. She helped with the billing. She was the daughter of Louie Pratt who was the head ivory cutter and also ran the theater in town. She was divorced and had one daughter.

Then there was Brainerd Smith and I guess he did specifications out in the factory. We also used to have to print up the clock cards and pay stubs. That was done on an addressograph. The Addressograph was downstairs. You cut the plates with the names and social security number and other information that was necessary. In order to punch the clock card you would feed the card in face down and you printed the stub and then you moved it up and you printed on the face of the clock card and then you turned it over and printed on the back of the clock card and printed the name and social security number. For each employee you had three times you had to push the pedal. It was a wonder that at the end of the day you weren’t still flopping your feet up and down.

Then also they used to use it to print the payroll sheets. That would be by department the big sheets that would have all the names on and as you did the payroll you would feed the sheet in with a carbon on it and there was an individual card for each person and that card would go in and the information would go on the card and go through the carbon onto the payroll sheet. The names were also printed on the little pay envelopes, but not the information that they filled in which was also done on the addressograph.

One time when they had another job for Brainerd to do, he was supposed to be doing the clock cards, he told Mr. Holmes he had the clock cards to do. So Mr. Holmes told him, “Well, Edith can do them.”

I said “well, I don’t know how to do them.” He said, “You can learn, can’t you?” That was the end of that and another duty was added to my duties whenever Brainerd couldn’t do it.

Then we had Wilbur Holmes. We used to call him ‘Willie’. . . Willie Holmes. He lived in Deep River and was a veteran of WWI. He was kind of a womanizer. He had a son and a daughter. Eventually he and his wife divorced. I don’t know if he remarried, but he died down in Georgia.

Next we had George Seeley. He was Secretary of the company and he was in charge of sales and as I said he was the husband of Rica Harwood, one of the twin daughters of Benjamin Harwood, and also was related to the Cheneys of Comstock, Cheney and Company.

Alma Pearson used to do cost work with Willie Holmes and she also did the figuring of people’s times. Back in those days the girls in the factory did all the little operations of gluing down the action felt, putting the screws in and the ‘spoons on’ . . . it was all done by hand. Their base rate was 35 cents an hour but each day as they did each operation it was weighed, tallied up and posted on their account. Then, at the end of the week besides their 40 hours at
35 cents an hour they were given the additional hours at piece rate, so they did make a little more than 35 cents an hour.

Ebba Anderson was the secretary to George Seeley and she also was secretary to Mr. Gould. Of all the people that were there, all that is left now is Eva Bohling Gilbert, Brainerd Smith and myself.

I used to get in there early in the morning as I got a ride down from Chester. One time the telephone rang, and nobody was there so I answered it. The woman said it was Western Union and she had a telegram. I said, “Well there is no one here but me so if you go slowly I will take it down.” She did that and gave me the telegram and when she gave me the name of the person that had sent it, I wrote Strawberry and Clover. I typed it up and I put it in on Mr. Seeley’s desk.

When they came in, Ebba got there first and she happened to look on his desk and she started to laugh. Everyone hovered around and they were all laughing. So someone said who took this telegram? I said, “I did.” They said, “Where did you get this name from?” I said, “That’s what they said.” They said, “No, it is not Strawberry and Clover, it is Strawbridge & Clothier.” But hey, it sounded like Strawberry and Clover to me!

In the yard, the lumber yard there was Steve Beale and Dan O’Shea. Steve was a nice colored man. Dan liked to “nip” and I think he nipped quite a bit while he was driving and I think Dan was a little sweet on Alma. One day he drove the truck around back and there were some pillars there that held up a little porch like thing. He came in to get petty cash at Mr. Holm’s desk. Alma came over and she took his glasses, they were really dirty. She said “Dan, how can you see out of those glasses?” She washed the glasses off and put them back on his face and he got the petty cash and down he went got in the truck and backed into the pillars. He missed them on the way in with his dirty glasses, but with the clean ones, he wacked them good.

In September of 1938, we moved the main office to Ivoryton. It was the intention that we would move everything to Ivoryton and close up Deep River because business wasn’t that good and we were losing money.

The building in Ivoryton was a two story building. If you came from the outside you came into the vestibule and on the right was the room where I was. I was receptionist, I was telephone operator, I did accounts receivable and I did payroll.

To your left was the vault, the next room to the left was a reception room, it was also the room where Brainerd and I put up the payroll. They had put iron bars on the windows. To your right was the door into my office. Across the hall were the men’s room and the ladies room and at the end of the building was the conference room where the directors used to
meet. Up stairs at the top of the stairs, Brainerd sat. You went down a hall to your left and Ebba Anderson’s office was there and off of her office was Mr. Gould’s office. You went out to your right to Mr. Gould’s office and you came into the main room. The main room housed Eva Bohling, Roberta Blanchard Upson, Alma Pearson and continuing on was a small room that looked out on the front street and that was Wilbur Holmes’ office. Off that same room, next door to Mr. Holmes’ office was Mr. Seeley’s office and that comprised all there was to the building.

The stairway . . . you went up two steps and you were on a landing. You went up four more steps and you were on another landing and then up another three steps and you were at the top.

One morning, Mr. Holmes was late and he came rushing up the stairs. When he got to the second landing and going up three steps he stubbed his toe. He was wearing a fedora hat and his head hit the wall and the hat came down over his ears. I heard the noise and went rushing up the stairs. Brainerd jumped up and we both helped pick him up and then we started to laugh. With that Alma came rushing out to see what had happened and she really laced into us for laughing at him, but I guess Brainerd and I have a weird sense of humor, because Mr. Holmes sure did look funny.

I had a similar experience on that stairway. When I did Accounts Receivable I had to go upstairs to get the different books. I would get the sales book and come down and post it and then bring it back upstairs. Then I would bring down the account receivable and accounts disbursements and post those and start back up with them. This particular day I started up with the accounts receivable and payroll book. As I went to go up the stairs, I stubbed my toe. I landed on the landing, rolled over on my back with the books on top of me. I heard someone saying “What was that noise?” All of a sudden I lay there looking up and here are all these heads looking over the banister railing. Some one said “Oh, it’s just Edith,” and everyone went back to work!

The telephone system -- that was just a telephone. You had all these buttons for the different lines. You had a dial where you could dial somebody’s number upstairs. On the wall was a little section that had three lights, a red, green and a white light. We had two lines and as the lines rang a different light would light. If they wanted someone, you pushed down the hold button and you dialed the person and told them who was on such and such a line. If someone came in to see someone, you could dial someone and tell them that ‘so and so’ was downstairs to see them.

Continuing about George Seeley and his wife. . . His wife Rica lived in New Haven and she used to come over with her colored chauffeur to see George about something. The