

PATRICIA FAIRFIELD-ARTMAN ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Laura Anderton

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Fairfield-Artman

DATE: August 2, 2004

[Editor's note: There is some discrepancy about the interview date since the interviewer refers to both August 1 and August 2.]

[Begin CD 1]

PFA: 2004, testing August 2, 2004. This is Tuesday, August 1, 2004. A narrative with Dr. Laura Anderton. And Dr. Anderton, the only question I have, specific question, is: Tell me the story of your life. Wherever we want to start, whatever your memories are, and as I indicated and you signed and you kind of read my proposal—

LA: Can we cut it off for now?

PFA: Sure, okay.

LA: I graduated from Wellesley College in 1940 and this was just prior to well, actually [Second] World War, during my junior year, many of the boyfriends, our boyfriends, went into the service. So, although right after I graduated, I was a biology instructor and acting dean at Howard Seminary, a girls' school in Massachusetts.

It wasn't until 1943 that I joined the WAVES [United States Naval Reserve known as Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] because the war was getting more intense in Europe. After joining the WAVES, I went directly to Northampton, Massachusetts, which is where I went to Smith College in Northampton and later was transferred to Mount Holyoke College to be commander of the Communications School there.

My next assignment in the service was to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, where I was battalion commander of the Hospital Corps School. After completing my duties and after the war, I in 1948, I took advantage of the GI Bill of Rights [United States legislation passed in 1944 that provided benefits to World War II veterans] and went to Brown University.

At that time, I was planning, I had been invited to go to two places: associate dean at Wellesley College and, at the same time, to be an instructor and dormitory counselor—an instructor of biology and dormitory counselor at the Woman's College of the

University of North Carolina [WC] where I was invited by Katherine Taylor, the person who was then the dean of WC.

It was an interesting comparison to see, to be in those different women's colleges and see how very close they operated. But at the time I was at WC, it was a period that is so different than today for many reasons. And one of the reasons was: When Katherine Taylor invited me to be an instructor and guidance counselor, dormitory counselor, she was so persuasive that I accepted her invitation and came to Greensboro.

The campus, at that time, was almost in a different era then today because it was a period of elegance in dress and the girls were constantly trying and being persuaded to act as ladies. [chuckles] It was in many ways like the period in French history when the ladies of the French Paris Salon were so effective in actually being the power and the minds behind many of the important things that went on. And I always felt that this was a golden period when women had a tremendous amount of influence, not only on the greater university, but when they married, on their communities because of the experiences they had had in leadership there at the University, at UNCG.

PFA: Were most of them living in the dorms at the time?

LA: Yes, they were—

PFA: Yes.

LA: —and there were some awfully interesting [chuckle] things that happened at that time. I never could understand why the gates, there were gates that were locked at 10:00 at night. Was it to keep the girls in—? [chuckles]

PFA: [laughter]

LA: —or the boys out or was it both. [laughter] I never figured that one out but that tradition soon changed?

PFA: They had curfews too?

LA: They had curfews. Very definitely curfews. But, it was a time when the women at the college had a great influence on their communities and on the greater university with which we were affiliated. Many of the meetings that were held in Chapel Hill [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill] required our leaders to be there, along with the leaders of State, NC State [University] as well.

So, women had an influence in the university but one of the most intriguing things that happened this past spring at reunion, was that the 50th Reunion Class invited me to a party after the festivities at the Alumni House and every single person in that committee—in that group of 50th Reunion Class talked about—was asked to tell what she was doing in her community, in her city, in her community, and in the state. Every single woman was very intimately connected with the school system, the political system, all kinds of church activities, governmental organizations, they were all leaders in their communities and in the state!

PFA: Yes.

LA: And, it was to me, a very gratifying thing because service is the motto of, and it still is, in the song—

PFA: That's right.

LA: So, it was a great accomplishment, I thought. It was a great thing to see all these women actually carrying out those—[coughs]

While I was at the Woman's College, I was not only an instructor in biology, but I was also a dormitory counselor—

PFA: [unclear]

LA: —a counselor of Weil [Residence] Hall and one night, one of the dormitories which is adjacent to Weil Hall was being built and some material there, some, that was left by the carpenters caught fire and a girl came into my apartment and said that there was a terrible fire next door. And so, immediately I called the fire department and I said, "May I speak with the chief?" And I got the chief of the fire department and I said to him "There is a bad fire next door to me but I can't tell you where it is unless you promise not to ring your bells or to blow your sirens."

PFA: [laughter]

LA: And he said, "Lady, where is the fire?" [laughter] And I said, "I can't tell you, as I said, if you promise to do those two things, then I'll tell you exactly where it is and it's getting worse." He said. [laughter] "Lady, where is it?"

PFA: I love it.

LA: And I said, "It's at the campus of the Woman's College and the new dormitory next door is going to be—if you don't come in a few minutes. And literally in a few minutes, the fire engines were there to extinguish the blaze.

PFA: That's amazing.

LA: —was taken care of.

PFA: Did you, did you [unclear] together? [tape skipped]

LA: Yes, I was counselor and had a bedroom and lounge and bath where it was possible for me to have privacy, yet I could entertain the students or they could come into the, they could come into my apartment and talk and we also used that room that was like a sitting room, to have groups.

There was a marvelous thing, the Social Science Forum and the Arts Forum where they had people from all over the United States that were experts in their field and they

would come and give lectures. After these lectures at the Social Science Forum or the Arts Forum, we would meet in my—the girls in the dorm would meet to have an intimate talk with these specialists and it was a marvelous thing because it was a one-on-one kind of thing where, for example, a history major—particularly the art majors and those that were affiliated in sociology came and so forth to the—and tremendous amount of interest was aroused by those contacts with the very people who had talked—

PFA: Yes.

LA: —and been brought to the campus and they were really outstanding, outstanding people.

PFA: Yes.

LA: I served under Chancellor [Walter Clinton] Jackson, Chancellor [William W.] Pierson, who was interim from Chapel Hill, Chancellor [Otis A.] Singletary, Chancellor [James S.] Ferguson, and Chancellor [William E.] Moran.

PFA: Wow! That's quite a group!

LA: When male students were admitted to the college, there was a noticeable change in the leadership. That is to say, for the first time, there was a great impetus to get a man to be the president of the student government to the degree that it was very difficult, the men were so aggressive, that for a short time, they were—the men were in charge and then it simmered down and the person of choice, that is whether it was a leadership of a woman or a man, it became the person who was the best, the better leader—

PFA: Yes.

LA: —and women did serve as president of college government after that. At the meeting, there were not as many people as there should be so, we were reprimanded and told to reprimand the people—[chuckles]

PFA: Wow!

LA: —who were not there to come—because the meeting some of the voting couldn't take place. We didn't even have a quorum. So, should that be mentioned, do you think?

PFA: Yeah, sure, sure.

LA: This is being taped now?

PFA: Yeah.

LA: Okay. Faculty meetings were considered so important that if a meeting had been scheduled by a department, to have a departmental meeting, they had to cancel it to go to faculty meetings and your presence was needed and if there were not enough for a

quorum, they had to postpone the meeting and people who were not there were reprimanded by their department heads.

PFA: Wow! That's interesting. One of the things that many people mention is the cafeteria?

LA: Oh, yes.

PFA: Over at Stone. The—

LA: Yes. The Home Economics Building. In the Home Economics Building, Stone Hall, the cafeteria served excellent food and so most people at that time would plan to have their lunch there. It was a hot lunch. The food was very good. And very inexpensive. So, the Home Economics Cafeteria became a place where many meetings were held and enjoyed and much was accomplished because you have to eat and enjoy it as well with your friends and yet accomplish a great deal for the university.

PFA: Did you, one of the things also that I find interesting is that you were in biology. Was that—were there many females in that, in the sciences at that time?

LA: Yes, there were. Biology was—we had a lot of majors in biology and—

PFA: Yes.

LA: There had been, in the Biology Department where I was an instructor, a new public-address system put in so that it was possible for an instructor or professor to speak to the three laboratories in the Biology Building at one time. So, I had the microphone there and it was the day that were studying the fern. So, I said over the microphone, "Today we have an exciting lesson in the laboratory. We are going to be studying the sex life of the fern!" Immediately, the door opened to the room where I was announcing and in come Miss [Inez] Coldwell and she said, "That came in my laboratory too! Cut it off!" And I said, "Yes, ma'am." [laughter]

PFA: [laughter] That's great!

LA: But, I said it hearing from all three laboratories much laughter.

PFA: [laughter] That's wonderful!

LA: Let's see, what else? I had thought about some other things.

PFA: How was the transition when it went from Woman's College to males? Was it a smooth transition, do you think?

LA: Yes, it was for the reason that there were so few men at first.

PFA: Okay.

LA: I can remember having just two men in my laboratory class.

PFA: It seems as though everybody embraced the idea?

LA: There was some objection to the men. I don't know—If I could say something about the strictness of dress in the early years of Woman's College and then how it changed.

PFA: Really?

LA: And particularly it changed when men students were there.

PFA: Did it seem different—the college? When men started, when it became co-educational?

LA: There were so few men at first, that it didn't make much difference except that they wanted to be in charge.

PFA: Yes.

LA: Yes.

PFA: That's interesting.

LA: Should I say that?

PFA: Absolutely! Yeah!

LA: Okay. Well, let's see.

PFA: I think we're on.

LA: We're on? Okay. [laughter] You got all the things between. Where was I? There was very little, really there was very little change when the men came because there were so few of them and they did; however, when they first came, attempted to become leaders of college government with not too very much success.

The years of the Woman's College. The Woman's College years was a period of great modesty as far as dress was concerned. If you were going to the gymnasium and had your gym suit on, which involved shorts, you had to wear a coat from your dormitory to the gymnasium because the shorts had to be covered. You couldn't wear shorts in—on campus.

PFA: Civil rights?

LA: So, the civil rights period was a very interesting one and I can recall the problem that the chancellor had when there was objection to having black students come and they met with the chancellor at his house one evening.

In my own biology class, there were very first—few students. [coughs] I can

remember when there was only one in my class and then two and then three but the numbers increased as the years went on but it took a long time for there to be many black students enrolled. The caliber, the abilities of the black students were very good academically and I always felt as if the, only those that were well-qualified for college were there because they competed very well in biology with the—with the other students. And as time went on, there was no, there seemed to me to be no problem with it.

PFA: Have you ever thought of becoming a medical doctor?

LA: I had early because after I got out of the service and came to the Woman's College, I thought I had the benefit of the GI Bill of Rights and could go and complete and become an MD. But there was a girl in my biology class, when we were studying the blood, that came up to me and students were requested to just have a pin prick and get their own blood so they could see their own blood. But one of the girls came up and she was crippled and her hand was also crippled and I looked at her and I took her wizened hand that just looked so small and deformed and I couldn't do it. And so, I said, "You don't mind taking some of my blood, it looks the same as yours." So, I did my own and put it on the slide and she looked at my blood. But I went home and I thought, "I don't think you should be an MD if you can't take blood." [chuckles]

PFA: Yeah, that's true.

LA: So—

PFA: When did you retire?

LA: When did I retire?

PFA: When did you retire?

LA: I think it was in 1972, which means that I taught there thirty-eight years, I think it was.

PFA: Wow! Do you go back to UNCG much now?

LA: I go back to things that—for, at reunion to things—reunion. I also always go to the special day for honoring scholars. I got a teaching award when I was there and that were invited, the people who got the former teaching awards, go also. But, I just like the emphasis on scholarship and good teaching that, you know, that the administration always sees to it that the people are honored.

PFA: I have, someone was telling me about the Golden Chain.

LA: Yes.

PFA: What is that?

LA: Yes. I was a member of the Golden Chain and was involved with that for a good many years and I think Golden Chain, for the students, is such a wonderful thing. It emphasizes the importance of good leadership and honors those who have been leaders in the student body.

PFA: Yes.

LA: We have so many men students now at the University that a lot of the problems. Our chancellor, Pat Sullivan, I think is to be congratulated for her emphasis on encouraging people to become leaders and on her special day when she gets leaders on campus and those had been honored as leaders to meet together. Also, her training of the ambassadors is another thing that I think has been important for the students themselves but also for the alumni to be in to be able to show new students around campus. So, Pat Sullivan, I think has done a wonderful job in her leadership of the University.

PFA: Okay. Your memories of dean—

LA: One of the gratifying things when you retire, I think, is having the students with whom you worked very closely remember you and come to see you and to call you on the phone. And there was one boy who worked under the hood where we were working with human tissue from the hospital and we worked very closely together. The hood was something that was sterile and you had to get your hands sterile and then put them through these holes in this big plastic hood and manipulate them so that no bacteria got in to infect the cultures. And we had worked very closely together.

He became an MD and he arrived and he was so tall he could hardly fit through that door and he came in and we had the best time talking over old times. And it was an interesting thing because working together that closely, he would tell me things that he probably wouldn't tell anybody else. For example, he was having trouble with his wife and what to do and in a very objective and non-emotional way, I would just talk back and answer questions as I saw them. And apparently, he had not forgotten that. So, it gave me insight into the fact that it's not only the education that encourages people to be factual but there's another dimension of teaching that I have really appreciated: One, I have several students who named their children after me. [chuckles]

PFA: Wow! That's wonderful!

LA: I hear from them very often. So, teaching has many dimensions. It's not only the factual information and ideas but there are other friendships that I cherish.

PFA: And you've stayed in touch with many of the retired faculty?

LA: I have, yes.

PFA: Are they still in Greensboro? Many of them?

LA: Oh, yes. I belong to a club that Rosemary McGee [professor of physical education]

belongs to. That Nancy White [Class of 1946 and professor of home economics] belongs to. That Marian Solleder [professor of health education] belongs to. The people you've interviewed—

PFA: Yes.

LA: So, we—yes, we really keep in touch after we retire.

PFA: Okay.

LA: There's another aspect of this, there's not just the knowledge that we honor, but there is an emotional aspect to WC/UNCG and that is almost a reverence and an emotional feeling toward the University that has helped each one of us who have been associated with it to grow intellectually and mentally and also to grow in respect and love of people whom we—whom we respect. So that I think that WC/UNCG has a great deal of that and it is seen around the time of commencement and when we're having reunions, but I think there is a dimension that all the chancellors, but specifically the present chancellor has encouraged the feeling for the University is more than just an intellectual thing, is what I'm trying to say.

PFA: I agree with you. Yes, okay.

LA: I received my undergraduate training and education, really, better than the word training [chuckles] at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts. After the war, I went to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island under the GI Bill of Rights and then I went to Chapel Hill, also on the Bill of Rights. And I had a Danforth Fellowship there and also a Fulbright Fellowship to the University of London in the mid-50's so that it was, it was a marvelous opportunity, particularly the opportunity to study in England for a full year.

And it was possible then to come back to UNCG and someone told me that my lectures were better because I always started out with the historical aspect, which, of course England is great for being concerned about history and apparently it showed through. But my deepest feelings about teaching and teaching at UNCG particularly, my deepest feelings about it are that it is something that makes you grow. It is something that enhances your life. It's almost a concern for other people that makes it so you always have, as long as you live, an interest in what's going on around you. You never become satisfied with the status quo because you want to know more about what's going on.

PFA: [laughter] Right. Yes.

LA: When I was associate dean, there was an experience that I frequently had when one member of the administration, a male, would come up and try to convince me to do something that he wanted done or try to get me to sign something that he wanted me to sign and he would shake his fist in—in my face. I decided that I didn't like that and I didn't want to be pressed, coerced into doing something in that manner. I didn't mind discussing it.

So, one day I got a good idea and I bought a mirror and had it placed up where I

was sitting and the first time he came in, he looked in the mirror and he saw that his tie wasn't right and he adjusted his tie and his fist that he was going put in my face turned into a tie-fixer and suddenly, he excused himself and left. He had forgotten what it was that he wanted to blame me for—

PFA: [laughter]

LA: —so, I kept the mirror there for a long, long time and it was even there when I retired.

PFA: That's a wonderful story.

[End of Interview]