

UNCG CENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Margaret Daniel Wilkerson Thurston

INTERVIEWER: Missy Foy

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MF: If you could start, I guess, by giving some general information, like when you were at Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina], and just some general information with that.

MT: Okay. I was there between 1943, graduated in 1947. I was a day student my freshman year, but I lived on campus the other three years that I was there.

MF: Living on campus versus being a town student or a day student—was there a lot of difference?

MT: A tremendous amount of difference. It was never my intention to be a day student. I had planned, frankly, to go to the University of Georgia [Athens, Georgia], but it was during the war years [World War II, 1939-1945 global conflict] and transportation was extremely difficult, so at the last minute I chose to stay here instead. And the dorms were all full, and I could not get on campus. So I did stay at home my first year, which is just like going to—was just like going to high school. You did not enter into campus life. You did not make many friends because you were sort of isolated. There was a "day students room," where all of the Greensboro girls gathered, but they were people you had known all your life anyway. So you were not a part—you did not feel a part of life of campus life at home, as a day student.

MF: How did that change when you became a sophomore?

MT: Well, when I became a sophomore and I went into Jamison Hall, I immediately had lots and lots of friends from all over. And many of them are today still good friends of mine. But then you became very actively involved in campus life and what was going on and seldom went home, which was twenty minutes across town. But it was just like going to two different schools as a day student and as a campus student.

MF: Like the campus sort of just opened up to you?

MT: Yes, that's right, exactly.

MF: Do you think there was some sort of almost a separation of the day students? Do you think that was intentional or something like that?

MT: No. I don't think it was intentional.

MF: Just sort of accidental?

MT: Yes. But if you are living in a dormitory with ever how many girls they held then, they become your friends. But if you are not there, you are simply on campus to go to your classes or to the library, and then you go home and do your studying and everything else. So you are just removed from the campus as a day student. No, I don't think it was an intentional thing at all.

MF: Tell me a little bit about dorm life.

MT: Dorm life was fun. You have to remember we were there during part of World War II, so things were very different for us than they were the last two years I was there. But dorm life was fun. Not many people had a date very often. There were no guys around at all. So we made our own fun. We did things—and probably became closer friends because of that. We had a good time together. Living in a dorm was very different. As a freshman—which I, of course, was not there then—they had closed study for freshmen. But you had to stay in your rooms from maybe seven to ten [pm]. I can't remember—whatever the closed study hours were.

MF: I think that's what it was.

MT: And lights out at eleven o'clock [pm]. As you became an upperclassman, you did not have closed study. There were rules and regulations. The dorms were locked at—I think maybe eleven o'clock. You signed in and off campus. Everywhere you went off-campus you signed in in your dorms, so that the housemother knew exactly where you were. We had to have permission for weekends. You only had two weekends—I mean, a certain number of weekends a semester that you could be away from campus. If you did not average a C average—I want to think maybe you didn't get weekends away. Or only two a semester, or—

MF: But there was some difference if you—?

MT: Yes. Like weekends. I think we may have been allowed to stay out until eleven-thirty [pm], say, on Saturday night, but only Saturday night. But nobody minded. I mean, everybody was under the same set of rules. And sure, you complained about it, but it was all part of it. So—but we had a lot of campus activities. We made our own fun. I can't really tell you how now, except that we had a good time and went home a lot with friends you had made—a friend from somewhere would take six girls home for the weekend and things like this—totally unrelated to having a date or being able to go to [University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill for dances much or this kind of thing because everybody was in the service one way or another. Then when they came home—of course, you did have a date. When the dances came up, sometimes they would send officers—there was an army camp here in Greensboro, a basic training, and then it became an Overseas Replacement Depot. They were here before going overseas. And sometimes the officers

would send fellows over to date girls, to go to the dances, and it was real funny because somebody would have a list of the names of the men, and they'd say, "You take Joe Smith here, and you take Bill Brown," and off you'd go. You know, you had a feeling that a lot of them were married and had families and everything else, but so what. I mean, you know, it was war time.

MF: And you didn't know who you were going to get?

MT: No. Absolutely not. I mean, he might be four feet tall or eight feet tall or whatever. But it was fun, and everybody, like I say, was in the same boat, so it was just a fun time. We often—some friends and I often laugh about those dances, and who you'd end up going with. Oh, but it was a fun time; it was, in spite of the problems. We had a good time. The facilities on campus for student activities were not wonderful then. There was one little, tiny shop in the bottom of the administration building. Is the administration building still there?

MF: Well, they've got Mossman [Building] for the administration, now, but I think—are you talking about Foust [Building]?

MT: Yes. Foust. There's a little tiny, little shop down in the basement called the Junior Shop. The junior class ran it. You could get a coke and a pack of cheese crackers, and that was about the extent of it. And the room probably should have held twenty people, and there would be two hundred in there.

MF: Oh, yes.

MT: I mean, no nice student union facilities of the kind that schools have now. But you just nudged your way on in and managed to get what you wanted.

MF: Yes, and bump into a few people you knew.

MT: That's right. That's right.

MF: I think they had a cafeteria in the basement of the home ec[onomics] building or a little restaurant—

MT: Yes. Yes. The home ec cafeteria. And the food was all cooked by the students in the home ec department. It was wonderful.

MF: That's what I heard.

MT: Wonderful. And our real biggie was on Sunday night—particularly Sunday night because they always had macaroni salad for supper. We would go ride the bus downtown and have lunch—I mean, have dinner—at a Chinese restaurant, which was called—well, I can't think of the name of it. I know where it was. Anyway, we could go downtown and have chicken chow mein dinner for fifty cents.

MF: Wow.

MT: Of course, that fifty cents was probably as hard to come by as five dollars would be now. But that was our thing on Sunday night. We'd always go downtown to the Chinese restaurant and have dinner on Sunday nights. Fun, you know.

MF: Yes. I've heard other people say that on Friday nights they had liver or something, so they—

MT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

MF: So they'd go eat at the home ec cafeteria.

MT: Or down at The Corner. There was a little gathering place down at the corner of Tate [Street], and that was just really a soda fountain kind of place with booths. But you'd go down there and sit all night for the price of a coca cola. So that was another one of the big entertainment features. When you mentioned dining room: during the war, they had a shortage of help in the kitchen and in the dining room. And every girl on campus had to serve meals, maybe two weeks a semester. And, of course, this was when breakfast was buffet, lunch was buffet, but dinner was seated at night. And, as I recall, there were probably round tables for eight or ten, white tablecloths. And you were served. And we had to all take turns working in the dining room for two weeks a semester. I mean, it was just part of being there. You were required to do it. And you had two tables to serve, and they had these enormous trays that—you'd take your tray, and they'd plunk all the vegetables and meats and everything on it, and you'd have to walk to your two tables with this huge tray. Now, why more of us weren't killed, I do not know because they were heavy and always the girls at the tables you were serving would say, "We want seconds, please." So that you'd have to go back and get the second tray load of all those vegetables. But, again, that was one of those things that everybody did. And you didn't mind it. It was part of the "war effort," and you felt like you were helping somebody somewhere, so you did it. But it was quite a different time.

MF: What other things were different on campus because of the war?

MT: Well, that's a good question. Of course, nobody had a car. I mean, people didn't have as many cars. You had a family car. But you didn't go to school with a car then, anyway.

MF: I think I remember somebody saying that towards the end they started having some of the [United States] Army Nurse Corps veterans show up in their classes.

MT: Yes. Yes. On the GI Bill [United States Act that provides benefits for military veterans], that's right. Coming back to school after the war was over, and that's true of my last two years too. And maybe students who maybe could not have afforded it before, but they could get the GI Bill of Rights and get an education. So that's right. They did come back.

MF: Did that change the nature of classes?

MT: Not really. I think those people that I remember, those that did come back, felt and were so much more mature than we certainly were, and probably looked at a lot of our fun things as kind of childish because in 1943, '44, '45, a college student was not nearly so sophisticated as a college student is today.

MF: Right.

MT: You know, they were not as worldly, or they hadn't been and done as many things. There were not as many things accepted, acceptable, as they are today. So—

MF: Yes, television has brought a lot of people and places right into your own home.

MT: Oh, yes. That's right. The dances, of course, that were held were very different. Not well attended. Well, I take that back. Fairly well attended under the circumstances, but not like—I don't—do they still have dances on campus anymore? I don't know. Sorority and—

MF: Yes. I think it's more like a general party. But they do have several organized dances, although I don't know what the attendance usually is.

MT: But students then were on campus on weekends. How many students stay on campus on a weekend here? I would imagine it's a very small percentage.

MF: Yes, I'm not sure that they go home, but—

MT: But somewhere—to a weekend football or something or another. Or whatever. But this was not true then. We stayed on campus on weekends and had a good time doing it. And I guess maybe that's why you feel a little closer to a campus life. Maybe we felt a little closer to campus life than maybe students do now. I don't know.

MF: Yes. Also there were some Saturday classes.

MT: That's right. There were Saturday classes. And by the time you got to be a junior, though, you weren't as likely to have Saturday classes. Either that or you'd wised up how to do your schedule so you didn't have them.

MF: To avoid them.

MT: Yes. Right. But even—a lot of times, we'd be in class until five o'clock [pm]. I mean, you know, I'd have a biology lab until—two till five on Friday afternoon too. And I don't know whether this is still true.

MF: Oh, yes. Labs are still three hours, and I'm sure some people get stuck with them on

Fridays.

MT: But classes were until noon on Saturday.

MF: Yes. That makes me think of a question that I've not asked anybody yet. As far as registering for your classes for the following semester, I remember when I was in college, we—juniors and seniors got priority for their schedules first. And then sophomores and then freshmen came at a completely different time. They did not even get to pre-register. And now it's sort of done in a lottery-type system.

MT: Oh, is it?

MF: I guess that—well, it's not really a lottery, but I guess that's the best way to explain it. You sort of randomly are assigned an appointment, but graduate students get priority. They get a pre-registration day on Saturday that only they can attend.

MT: Yes. Yes.

MF: And I was just—it just occurred to me, I've not asked anybody—how did registration for the next semester or the next year go?

MT: Well, as I recall—now, when we were freshmen, I think your courses were pretty well set, regardless of in which direction you were going.

MF: Right. General college type things.

MT: That's right. But after your freshman year, you chose with the help of your advisor the courses you needed for what you were going to get. And then you knew who was teaching those courses and at what hours, and you stood in line to get a certain teacher on a certain day. The class might have been full by the time you got there, by the time it came your turn, in which case you had to re-juggle your whole itinerary. I mean—I work in itineraries—your whole schedule, you know, to do it. But I remember it was a long and very laborious situation in the gym.

MF: Was it usually done in one day?

MT: Yes. As I recall, it was done in one day. It took about all day because many times you'd have to stop midway through because you couldn't get the course you want and kind of go back to square one and start over. And I remember it was a tedious day.

MF: Yes. Nobody really liked it, I'm sure.

MT: No. And of course, everybody wanted certain courses at certain times and certain teachers, and they were always the ones that went like that [snaps fingers]. So many times, like I say, you'd get about half way through your schedule, and you'd have to—it wouldn't work. You'd have to simply go back and start over and make some concessions. "Well, I'll take this teacher for this class, if I can get that teacher for this class."

MF: Well, I'm sure if there was a class you needed, and you were a senior, they'd probably let you have it.

MT: Yes. By then. But it was—the first year or so, I remember it being rather awesome to get it all worked out. And I'm sure—well, you say it's much easier now.

MF: Well, they're trying to come up with an easier system. I guess, personally, I feel like juniors and seniors should get preference.

MT: Yes, I do too.

MF: But—and it used to be that way. I remember when I was an undergraduate.

MT: Did you go out here?

MF: Yes. I went to UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro].

MT: You did?

MF: Now, there's a—it's all on computer, of course, and there's a system of appointments. But see, I've been a graduate student since they've had that, and so I go to this graduate student registration day. So I've never had to deal with this appointment system, so I don't know exactly how it works. I know it is kind of on a random basis.

MT: Yes.

MF: Yes, that's interesting because registration day itself, if you haven't pre-registered, I think, still works on the same type principle, except it's computerized. So like lists of classes are put up, and when they're closed out, they're highlighted or something.

MT: Yes.

MF: Well, anyway, what about student government?

MT: Student government was good.

MF: It was—it seems like it was a really important part of the campus life.

MT: It was a very important part and they—

MF: It seemed like it was rather prestigious too.

MT: It was very prestigious. And as freshmen, sophomores, you are very much—you were very much in awe of the student government officers because they were on a pedestal. Is this still true? I mean, they were outstanding, and the funny thing about it was most of

them are still outstanding. I notice from the alumni boards, some of the women that I knew who were very outstanding then in student government and have continued to be so in their personal lives since then. But it was a big job, and there was much politicking and campaigning on campus, and it was extremely important.

MF: Yes. A lot of alumni have expressed that being a women's college and serving on student government, that there was a unique experience involved with that, and that they seemed to have been given a chance to develop skills that they wouldn't have otherwise.

MT: Have otherwise. Yes. I can believe that. I was never a student council officer, but I can believe that. And they had a judicial board—it was very prestigious—that dealt with infractions of rules, this kind of thing. And they were very, very stern. Fair, but stern; but as I recall, a rule was a rule was a rule. I don't care what the exception was; if you broke the rule, it didn't matter. And so it was a very strict board. That was an elective board, I'm sure. I'm positive it was.

MF: Yes. I think it was. What about some of the people? Some of the faculty? People like, I guess, Katherine Taylor [Class of 1928, Dean of Women, Dean of Students, Dean of Student Services, Director of Elliott Hall]

MT: Katherine Taylor was the—was my housemother for two years in Weil Dorm before she became dean. She had just come out of the service, as a matter of fact. She was in the [United States] Navy.

MF: Oh, okay. I think I remember that.

MT: And she was there before, of course, the war, and taught French. And then she came back my junior year, and she still taught French, and she was housemother in Weil, and she was a marvelous influence. She was a very straight but a very fair woman. She had a good sense of humor, and she enjoyed the girls. But you stood back a little bit. There was no buddy-buddy stuff with her. But she was a marvelous influence on the girls that she both taught and in her dormitory. And, of course, I've forgotten what year she became dean. Miss Harriet Elliott [history and political science faculty, Dean of Women] was dean when I was there. Of course, Dr. [Walter Clinton] Jackson was still—

MF: Oh, right. Yes.

MT: —president of the college. And I don't know what year Miss Taylor became dean. It was after I graduated in '47.

MF: I think it was '48. I might be wrong. [Editor's note: 1948 is correct.]

MT: Yes. Yes.

MF: Or '49.

MT: Yes. That's about right, I expect.

MF: Because I think it was before Ed[ward Kidder] Graham [Jr.] came.

MT: Yes, it was.

MF: And he came around '50, '51, '52, somewhere—See all the things you pick up from talking to alumni? [chuckles] [Editor's note: Chancellor Graham was chancellor from 1950-1956.]

MT: Yes, right.

MF: You get these general notions of when things occurred. One of the other things I wanted to ask you about is more current. With the change to a coeducational institution, how do you feel about that change taking place, I guess sometime in the '60s, maybe '63 or so? '62?

MT: I don't really have a problem with it being a coeducational school. I hear people say that they think we should still be a women's college. I don't feel that way at all. What I think it's done to those of us who were there when it was Woman's College is sort of removed you from the whole system. You know, I don't know my way around there anymore.

MF: Well, it's changing so fast, I see that every year [unclear].

MT: I know. And so much has been added. It has grown so much. And things are so different that I feel somewhat lost when I go over there, which is not that often anyway, really. Reunions and maybe some alumni business or this kind of thing. But I don't feel—I don't really feel a real affinity to it anymore. And I've got two daughters and a son. My son went to Chapel Hill. Neither of my girls were even interested in looking. Maybe because it was at home. It was in Greensboro. But they were not even interested in going and looking at it, which to me is a shame. It's a state institution. I had some feelings about it, and I would have liked for them to have at least looked into it, but they really were not interested. And I don't know whether I should mention or not, the problems that are going on with the Alumni Association.

MF: Well, that's one thing I was going to ask you about, anyway.

MT: Yes. I feel very strongly about that, and I am not interested in contributing to the Alumni Association until it has been resolved. And I'm sure that's not the first time you've heard that.

MF: No, it's not. No. It's probably about the hundredth.

MT: Yes. [both chuckle] I really am not, and I don't think I understand it one hundred percent, to start with. But until it has been resolved one way or the other, then I just have said, "Thank you. I will not make any contributions until we know."

MF: What do you understand the problem to be? I get different stories from different people, so I was just wondering. I'm trying to get an understanding of what the nature of the problem is.

MT: Well, the nature—like I say, I'm not sure I understand it at all, but it appears to me that the Alumni Association is going to be taken away from the alumni.

MF: Taken over by the university?

MT: Yes. And now, whether this is true in other large schools and universities, I don't know.

MF: Yes. I don't know either.

MT: But I think the Alumni Association has been autonomous all these years, has it not?

MF: Yes.

MT: And successfully so, apparently. And I don't know what the problem is—why it can't stay that way. And I'm not on the inside on it. You know, I simply listen to this, that and the other. I knew Barbara Parrish [Class of 1948, Director of Alumni Affairs, Alumni Association Secretary] very well because she was a class behind me in school. And I think a lot of Barbara, and I think a lot of Brenda Cooper [Class of 1965, MEd 1973, Assistant Director of Alumni Affairs], who have given more years of their lives, twenty four hours a day, to the Alumni Association than I think anybody should do. And yet it seems like it's—well, I think Barbara retired earlier than maybe she had planned. And I don't know that I think Brenda's going to come out smelling like a rose, when all is said and done. And then I guess I resent that, having known—I used to do the tour program for the UNCG Alumnae Association. And I had a very good working relationship with Barbara and Brenda, and I saw the hours and hours and hours that they put in over there. Not that they did it to be thanked for it, but that they weren't even recognized for. And then to suddenly be shafted, which is what it looks like to me. Yes. I feel strongly about it. I also wonder—and nobody has been able to answer the question—I understand that the problems have been in mediation with the Center for Creative Leadership for months and months. Who's paying for it? Where's the money? I mean, that is not inexpensive.

MF: True. I hadn't thought about that.

MT: And they were talking about budget cuts this and budget cuts that, but who's paying for all this mediation that's going on? I don't understand.

MF: They've also got a problem between [Chancellor William E.] Moran and the people who contribute to the Weatherspoon [Art] Gallery, and I think that there was talk of that going into mediation over there as well. So, I'm not sure—

MT: What is that over?

MF: I'm not sure. Because there aren't very many alumni that I talk to that are contributors to Weatherspoon, but there are some—a few that I have, and the impression I get—and I could be wrong on this—but the impression I get is that it's the same type controversy that the University is trying to take control of the gallery.

[interruption redacted]

MT: We were talking about the Weatherspoon thing. No, I'm not involved in Weatherspoon. I don't even know about it.

MF: Yes. I know very, very little about it. Just a couple of people mentioned it. Also, with Moran, Chancellor Moran, there's the situation where they are trying to move into [National Collegiate Athletic Association] Division I athletics, and I was wondering if you had any opinion one way or the other on that?

MT: Not really. I just haven't given it a thought. I knew they were, but I haven't given it a thought.

MF: I know I've made the interview kind of compact here, so I want to give you a chance if there's anything else that I've neglected to ask you, that maybe I forgot or that you feel is important.

MT: Well, I certainly treasure my education that came from there, and I wouldn't take anything in the world for it. I think—and I'm sure it's still true—I just don't know. Academically, Woman's College was way up in rank in the United States. It was hard. I remember seeing girls who came from small towns in the eastern part of North Carolina who could not even take freshman English. They had to take a sub-freshman English before—and spelling and things like this—before they could even get into freshman English. We felt we had a good education system in Greensboro—public education—but it was still hard, and I went to summer school every summer I was there, simply to take a course and get it off so I could devote more time to something else the next semester. I would not take a million dollars for it. I really would not. I can remember taking many courses, and I thought, "This is a terrible waste of time. It will never do me any good." I've used every one of them one way or another. And so I really cherish it very, very much. In retrospect, as I said in the beginning, I had planned to go to the University of Georgia. I'm so glad I didn't that—because I think I got here more than I would have gotten somewhere else, and I still feel strongly about the school. I don't sound like it in some of my responses to you, but I do. And I hate to see the kind of things going on that are apparently going on. But I don't think I'm alone in that. There are a lot of people in Greensboro who feel the same way. But I would like to see it continue to thrive, continue to be a good school. I don't know what the academic ratings are there now. I know they've got good graduate programs.

MF: Yes. I know they're also one of only five universities in North Carolina that hold a

chapter of Phi Beta Kappa [oldest collegiate honor society for the liberal arts and sciences in the United States].

MT: Yes.

MF: That says something.

MT: That's right. It surely does. So it was a wonderful school, and I am proud of my degree from there and always will be. But time marches on. Everything gets different, doesn't it?

MF: Oh, right. Finally I'd like to ask you if there are any other names that you'd like to suggest of people you think should be interviewed.

MT: Have you interviewed a whole lot of people?

MF: Yes. Quite a few.

MT: Do you remember who they were?

MF: I would recognize a name if I—

MT: Well, I guess everybody in the world says Emily Preyer [Class of 1939, honorary degree 1977]. Have you interviewed her?

MF: I have not. Bill Link [history professor] may have.

MT: Well, if you haven't, that would be well worth your time. You need local people?

MF: No. If you tell me where they are located, if they're not local, I can still get some of them.

MT: Not one in Boston [Massachusetts], though?

MF: Oh, perhaps, if I were on my way up to see my family in New Jersey.

MT: Well, there's a classmate of mine who—her name was Julia Alexander [Class of 1947]. She was from Asheboro [North Carolina]. Her married name is Kaufmann. K-A-U-F-F-no, K-A-U-F-M-A-N-N, I think it is. Her husband is a professor at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] and Harvard [University, both Cambridge, Massachusetts] and she lives in Cambridge, as a matter of fact, right outside of Boston. She has—she's on the Alumni Board of Trustees right now. She has done a lot of volunteer work in the judicial systems of Massachusetts and has served on committees appointed by the governor. She's on the Board of Visitors of Harvard Law School. And she is a really outstanding person whose mother, I think, also graduated from Woman's College. Her mother's name was Annie Kemp [Annie Moring Alexander, Class of 1910]. And so she goes a long way back. She's a very outstanding woman. And I can give you her address and telephone number and whatever. In fact, she comes to the Alumni Trustee Board—

MF: That's what I was thinking.

MT: —in October. Don't they usually meet in October?

MF: I think that's right. I don't remember for sure, but that sounds right. Well, I can end this, and then get the address from you.

MT: Oh, okay. But she would—

[End of Interview]