

UNCG CENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Martha Carson Isgett

INTERVIEWER: Missy Foy

DATE: May 14, 1991

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

MF: If you could start with some general information like where you are from, and when you went to UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro], and just general stuff like that to begin with.

MI: All righty. I attended UNCG from the fall of '63 until I graduated in the spring of '67. Hometown was here in North Carolina, down in Rocky Mount. And I guess the reason I wound up at UNCG is probably twofold. Number one, I knew before I ever graduated from high school what I wanted to do. I wanted to major in physical education and knowing that pointed me in the direction of UNCG because they had one of the finer programs in the country as far as physical education and teaching physical education was concerned. So that was probably a big incentive towards going.

And the other thing was that I had a teacher in junior high school, and her name was Ruth [Crowder] McSwain [Class of 1945]. I can't recall her maiden name because she was a UNC [University of North Carolina]—she was a Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina] graduate back in—sometime during the forties. I'm not sure exactly when. I'm trying to recall her maiden name, but can't. But, anyway, Ruth McSwain graduated from Woman's College, and I was always very favorably impressed when she spoke about it and the physical education department and so forth. Anyway, I guess that's the reason I wound up at UNCG.

MF: Since you were a phys ed major, what was the physical education department like? How was it set up?

MI: Well, at that point in time it was—in other words, when I entered school in the fall of '63, it was officially known as [The] University of North Carolina at Greensboro. However, that was the summer, if you recall, the summer of '63—

MF: Right, right.

MI: —when the Consolidated University Act was passed by the state legislature creating the—what, sixteen-campus system, and so forth. [Editor's note: In 1931, the North Carolina General Assembly redefined the University of North Carolina, which at the time referred

exclusively to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the new Consolidated University of North Carolina was created to include the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina State College in Raleigh, and Woman's College of the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. By 1969, three additional campuses had joined the Consolidated University through legislative action: the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the University of North Carolina at Asheville, and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. In 1971, North Carolina passed legislation bringing into the University of North Carolina System all 16 public institutions that conferred bachelor degrees.]

MF: Yes.

MI: But for all intents and purposes, the whole time I was there it was still Woman's College because there were no male students on campus, and you could count on your two hands the number of male town students even. So, for all intents and purposes, I went to a girls' school, is the way I felt about it.

MF: Yes.

MI: And the Department of Physical Education, of course, at that point in time—in fact I believe while I was there and maybe you can check this out, and I'm trying to recall. I think we became a separate school, the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation and Ethel Martus [Lawther, 1989 honorary degree], at that point in time, was the head of the department. [Editor's note: She served as dean for forty-three years.] Yes, because she was the department head. We were a department, but I think while I was there at UNCG we became the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation and Dance.

MF: Okay.

MI: And so, while I was there, it was—I loved it. I really loved it. Four of the funnest years of my life. It was college. No matter where you go is that time of year in your life where you're answerable to no one really but yourself and your ideals and goals and so forth. I enjoyed the program immensely. It was a very demanding program because I think academically it was one of the most demanding programs on the campus.

MF: Oh really? Okay.

MI: Yes. For instance, freshman year we got—we had a course that gave you one half-hour credit, but you were in the class seven hours a week, so—

MF: I think most of the phys ed courses worked like that.

MI: They're kind of like that. In other words, you're involved in sports activities. You might have a—part of that, one of those hours or a couple of them might be you're learning soccer skills, how to referee, officiate soccer games, and how to teach the skills and that kind of thing. So

it was very demanding in that respect that you were getting a certain amount of credit, but you were spending a great deal of time over at the facilities. And then the science portion of the curriculum was quite difficult. We took, for instance, biology, anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, physiology of exercises, all of which were three-hour semester courses that were in—. For the most part, most of them were taught by the faculty of—over at the department of biology and so forth. Very strenuous courses, most of which carried a three-hour lab and—

MF: Oh yes.

MI: And I can remember those darn physiology classes, dissecting frogs and excising gastric muscles and getting everything all set up and the drums and everything, the little muscle would go into tetanus and mess up your whole experiment. But it was demanding, but at the same time very enjoyable. I liked all of it. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

MF: Are there certain faculty or classes that really stand out?

MI: Our sister class—of course, we were the Class of '67, so the Class of '65 was our sister class, and we were sister class, of course, to the ones that came behind us. But I—as far as faculty were concerned—. Of course, while I was there, there were some extremely outstanding individuals in the Department of Physical Education, Miss Martus being one. All these folks enjoyed national recognition in the national associations and all. Dr. Celeste Ulrich [professor of exercise and sport science, Class of 1946] was there the entire time I was there. And at that point, many of them had already—had published books, and Dr. Rosemary McGee [professor of exercise and sport science, acting dean of women] was there the entire time I was there. In fact, I believe one of our texts she had coauthored at that point. But, anyway, they stand out in mind. As I say, Dr. Ulrich and Dr. McGee and Miss Martus. In fact, I was trying to think, she married at some point, after that, Dr. Lawther.

MF: Yes.

MI: And, in fact, I believed they retired over here to Chapel Hill in Carol Woods [retirement home].

MF: Oh okay, I know where that is.

MI: And, in fact, Miss [Dorothy] Davis [physical education faculty], I believe, who was there for the entire time I was there, later retired and came to Carol Woods. I guess probably one of the most influential people that I recall in the Department of Physical Education was June Galloway [1959 master of education, coordinator of student teaching, coordinator of the athletic division, one of the first women's basketball coaches] who, I guess in comparison to the others, was somewhat younger. I think when I went there, maybe she was forty, maybe. But she had a great deal of influence on us because she was our class advisor. And we thought a great deal of her. She was very special to all of us. She was very, very talented. She was, intellectually speaking—and her first love was physical education, and we all knew that. I think, as I look back on it, she always—you always knew she was giving her

all, always. And she expected that of you, but in a very kind way.

MF: Yes.

MI: She was able to let us know that. And I think everybody—as I recall, our class was a very close-knit class, and, of course, you get close because there were only twenty-some of us, I guess, in our class—physical education Class of '67. In fact, maybe there weren't even that many. But we became very close because we were all in the same classes, and when you're in class fifteen hours a week together and then extracurricular activities and intramural and competitive sports and things like that. So we were thrown together a lot and became quite close, and she inspired a great deal of confidence and feeling of belonging to all of us, so we appreciated her. She died [in 1974]. I had graduated and married and I think maybe even had one or two children at that point, and we had moved back to Durham [North Carolina]. And this must have been along in the early seventies, somewhere—'73, '74. But I think she contracted the flu and had all kinds of complications, and she died. I went to her funeral up in Greensboro, and it was quite a shock. But she was one of those people that had nothing to fall back on. We used to laugh about it sometimes. She was so thin. I mean, just emaciated almost, and so I suspect that probably she had not a lot to fall back on, and when a physical crisis came that—. She was really special. I mean, she was to all of us in that class. We enjoyed Dr. McGee a great deal. She was—she was a rarity to me in the department, really, because she came across kind of like your mom.

MF: Yes.

MI: If you know what I mean. And most of them you wouldn't say that. In other words, I wouldn't say that about Dr. Ulrich, for instance. But she was. She later became and served for a time as the dean of women.

MF: Oh, okay, I didn't realize that.

MI: I'm not sure about the dates on that, but she did serve as dean of women [Editor's note: Could find no documentation of this]—

MF: While you were—

MI: —and did an admirable job, of course, for those same reasons. She had those special qualities that kind of made you feel good about talking to her. She made you feel comfortable. As I say, the only thing that comes to mind is kind of like your mom.

MF: Yes. While you were at UNCG, did any men start becoming physical education majors during that time?

MI: No, no, no. Not while I was there. We didn't have any. And there were at that point in time we had majors—you could major in physical education or you could major in—I believe you could—I'm trying to think—we had dance majors and physical education majors, and I'm trying to think if we had a—[pause] The health education part of it was just beginning to

roll.

MF: Yes.

MI: In fact, the year I was there we had a visiting professor, Dr. [Marian] Solleder [head of the Department of Public Health Education, assistant dean of the School of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance]. She came from Ohio, I believe, and she was a visiting professor in the health end of things, and I think after that, of course, it took off more and more. But while I was there, I think most of us majored—we had a few dance majors, and the rest of us were majoring in physical education. And I think we had maybe a couple of rec[reation] majors. The curriculum was a little bit different for each of us. But those were the three majors and, no, there were no men students.

MF: Okay.

MI: It was still just all gals.

MF: In the physical education school and also, I guess, in the athletic department as a whole, what was sort of the philosophy of athletic competition at that time because when it was a women's college, there was no intercollegiate competition. It was just intramural—

MI: Right.

MF: —because they didn't want—well, I'm not exactly sure of the philosophy behind it, but it was something to the effect of not wanting the women to have to feel they were competing.

MI: That was beginning to change while I was there, I think. Because we—I played intercollegiate basketball the whole four years I was there.

MF: Okay.

MI: And we played other universities and went to tournaments. I remember we used to go down in South Carolina every year for a tournament down there at a—gosh, where did we go? Winthrop [University, Rock Hill], I believe it was.

MF: Yes.

MI: There was always a tournament down there every year, and we'd go down there and we used to play—we'd play High Point College [High Point, North Carolina] and various colleges around. It, of course, wasn't on the grand scale like it is now.

MF: Right.

MI: There was no such thing as a scholarship, and we just played to have a really good time. It was much more fun playing somebody else in the competition that was involved. And, of course, the game has changed mightily. When I was playing there, we still played six men

on a team—two stationary guards, two stationary forwards, and two rovers. So the game was far different than it is today, but we loved it, and we had a good time.

MF: Yes, yes.

MI: And I think probably that was a beginning because from there you went to a different game altogether and a very high level of competition and so forth. But we enjoyed it. I was trying to think if there were any other activities where we actually played other colleges other than basketball, and I'm not sure that there were. Missy, I don't think there were.

MF: Yes.

MI: I tried to think if I ever played softball against other colleges, and I can't recall that. The only thing I recall were as far as any intercollegiate activities were concerned was the basketball.

MF: What was the intramural program like at that time?

MI: Oh, tremendous program on campus. Just—everybody was involved and enjoyed that. They ran a tremendous intramural program and very successful.

MF: What kind of sports?

MI: We'd play volleyball, basketball, softball, the major type things, and we were—it was dorm teams, in other words.

MF: Oh, okay.

MI: Dorms were the center of activity then. I suspect that that has changed mightily too. But dorms were where everything began.

MF: Were there any town students on any of the teams? It was just sort of a thought that I just had.

MI: Yes, yes, because I remember two or three town students who were involved. In fact, one for a short time was a physical education major, although she later she changed her major. But yes, we had a few of them involved. I had some neat friends who were town students. I don't remember as far as numbers were concerned. I wouldn't suspect there were many of them. Their center of operations was Elliott Hall.

MF: Oh, right.

MI: In other words, that's where they, the town students, had their little headquarters. And we used to meet in the soda shop down on the bottom of Elliott. It was fun. [knock on the door]

MF: Let me pause this.

[recording paused]

Okay, with the town student population, a couple of things that come to mind is that I know back, oh, I guess about ten or so years before you were in school at UNCG, the town student population was real disconnected from the school. And I know that now they are not quite as disconnected, possibly because the population is so large of commuting students now—

MI: Sure.

MF: —but where did that stand at the time you were there?

MI: To be perfectly truthful, I think it was still that way to a degree. Although at the time I was there we had some neat gals who were town students, and they kind of made a place for themselves. But, in other words, they weren't involved in dorm life. And when I was there, dorm life was the center of things.

MF: Yes.

MI: And they weren't involved in that. But I remember we always—we used to make a point of going over to the soda because that's where we knew they'd be and—hanging out and having a hot dog together or whatever. They were organized as a group themselves, and they took part in things, but there was still at that point in time a real delineation as to whether you lived on campus, or you were one of the few who didn't.

MF: Yes. And what was dorm life like? I know—[interruption as child enters room]

MI: As I say, dorm life was really important then. I know that, and I suspect that's changed mightily since I was there but, you had your housemother. We had dorm meetings every Monday night, where everybody would come down, and we'd talk about events, activities, things that were planned either for the dorm or on campus, that kind of thing. The girls in the dorm, we were close. The people who were on your hall, you knew everybody.

MF: Yes.

MI: You did things together. You studied together. You—all the good times were kind of centered around dorm life, and I loved it. It was a fun, fun time. Dorms—we had set ups in the dorms. There were officers of the dorm who served to carry on the business of the dorm or plan activities and that kind of thing.

MF: Yes. What kind of activities would be planned for the dorm?

MI: Pretty sober and sedate as compared to—

MF: Yes, well, this was your—while you were there, this was before alcohol was allowed on campus?

MI: Oh, Lord, yes. In other words, as I recall, the real—

MF: I think it was the following year that they started to let students who were old enough have beer in the rooms.

MI: That soon?

MF: '68 or '69.

MI: Was it?

MF: Yes.

MI: Because I know that—

MF: One of the people who was responsible for that was Cherry, Cherry [Mann] Callahan [Class of 1971, 1987 PhD]. I can't remember what her maiden name was, but now she's associate vice chancellor for student affairs.

MI: Really?

MF: Yes.

MI: When I was there, of course, that was strictly taboo. In other words, the big thrill for some of the gals was trying to sneak a beer in the dorm to do their hair.

MF: Oh.

MI: Because that was taboo.

MF: Oh yes.

MI: We couldn't have any electrical appliances. I think dorms now you have refrigerators in dorms and microwave ovens and all that kind of thing. We didn't have any of that. Those things were just not allowed. All that was taboo. No, there was no—and maybe it was there, but I never recall seeing any drugs whatsoever, period. And only a couple of times did I see somebody sneak a beer in for a hairdo, that kind of thing. I guess we were pretty—I guess the biggest thing was shaving cream fights in the hall or water balloons. Or we used to play fractured flicks, and we'd get someone down at the end of the hall and flip the lights you know [gestures] do just crazy little stuff, but very, very innocuous, I guess, as things go now. [interruption as child enters room] Big fun times, I guess, were when we went over to [University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill.

MF: Yes.

MI: Or the whole campus transformed Friday at noon. In other words, from Monday morning

until Friday at noon, you looked pretty haggard.

MF: Yes.

MI: Nobody cared what their hair looked like or what they looked like pretty much, but Friday at noon you knew that the guys were either coming to campus or you might be leaving to go on somewhere, and the whole place transformed for the weekend and it was kind of fun to watch. But what that allowed us was a tremendous degree of laxity and freedom during the week. Although at that point in time, as I recall, we still wore skirts and dresses to class.

MF: Yes, there was still a dress code.

MI: Still a dress code.

MF: Yes, and I think you still had to sign in and out of the dorm

MI: Sign in and out. You had to be in the dorm at a certain time at night. The doors were locked.

MF: Did you still need parental permission to go away for the weekend?

MI: I can't remember that, Missy. I don't know if I—I know things were very strict. It used to be a big deal to try and sneak out and go get ice cream up at the Yum-Yum [hot dog and ice cream store on Spring Garden Street].

MF: Yes.

MI: And he must have covered for millions of us through the years, but that was the big thing to try to sneak out.

MF: Where was Yum-Yums at that time because it keeps moving further down Spring Garden?

MI: Okay, okay. When I was there, we had the freshman quad that Shaw [Residence Hall] was the U in the quad, in the U kind of, I guess, Cotten [Residence Hall] and a bunch of these down here, but Shaw was right here, and I stayed in Shaw. And if you—this is the corner that we were on. If you walked just a block that way, Yum-Yum was right down there.

MF: Okay. Because it started way down by the corner of Tate and Spring Garden and then slowly has moved down. [Editor's note: Yum-Yum was on the corner of Forest Street and Spring Garden Street.]

MI: Yes, it was right down the corner. In other words, when I came out of the front door, I just walked down the sidewalk to the corner and went up there, and that's where it was. And you were passing in front of Elliott Hall because Elliott was very small at that point. It was new to us but it was—

MF: Okay, that's Forest. Yes, that's Forest Drive.

MI: I don't know what it is now.

MF: Yes, the corner of Spring Garden and Forest Drive at that time.

MI: Yes, probably so, but it was really close by for us.

MF: I think it's about a block further down now, and I think it—

MI: Good ice cream. Lord help, chocolate chip—we used to eat rooms full of it every year.

MF: Yes, Yum-Yums has definitely been a landmark.

MI: Oh yes, that and down on Tate Street. A few little shops down there, and there was a post office down there, of course, which was always busy, and then a little soda shop down that way where you get sandwiches and that kind of thing.

MF: I guess at this time Tate Street was developing its sort of infamous reputation, and the hill by the music department would soon be covered with thorny bushes to keep people from sitting on it.

MI: Well, we didn't have any of that while I was there. It was just a neat little place with a few little neat shops down there and post office and a little soda shop. That was about all there was to Tate Street. And it enjoyed no kind of reputation, except just a nice little place to go buy cards or get you a few goodies or something like that, and it didn't have any negative rep at that point.

MF: Okay, so then that reputation that it developed in the seventies, I guess, started around the late sixties then?

MI: I don't know anything about that. When I graduated, it was still straight-laced and—[laughs]

MF: People I've talked to who went to school at UNCG in the seventies have said that when they were in high school and when they came for their freshman orientation, they were warned about Tate Street and not to hang out on Tate Street, all of which was rather exaggerated.

MI: Oh yes. Yes, it—there was no basis for it, whatsoever. And I never heard that said while I was there.

MF: Yes, okay.

MI: Ever.

MF: It had just become a coeducational college and just become a university also, and what kinds of changes were starting to develop during that time with that?

MI: Well, we enjoyed the idea or the status of knowing we were a university. But as far as I could tell, that was about the most major change. Becoming coeducational meant absolutely nothing to me the four years I was there because we didn't have any men students. There were absolutely none on campus and, as I say, count on a couple of hands how many we had as town students. So that part of it to me was insignificant, totally.

MF: Had they started opening Mary Foust and Guilford dorms as the Residential College yet? Okay, I can't remember when that—

MI: They were just the oldest dorms on campus. [laughs]

MF: Yes. And—

MI: Mary Foust used to be the hangout dorm kind of for the pseudo-intellectuals on campus. The ones who were, what was the name of the—?

MF: The *Corradi* [student literary magazine]?

MI: The *Corradi*.

MF: Yes.

MI: They all kind of hung together, and they selected Mary Foust, which I think was totally appropriate, but that—

MF: Yes.

MI: No, there were no men students appeared on campus, nothing.

MF: Also, let's see '62, I guess, was the first year that any black students graduated from—well it was still WC. [Editor's note: The first black students graduated from Woman's College in 1960.]

MI: I remember there weren't many black students, but I had some good friends and a couple of suitemates from time to time. But there weren't a lot of black students, no.

MF: Okay, I think it was until about '64 that the black students were housed in the—maybe it was earlier—were living in Shaw.

MI: Had to be earlier because when I was there they were interspersed.

MF: Okay, yes, it must have been a little bit earlier.

MI: Because we had some—we had black girls in our suite.

MF: It might have been like '60 or '61. Yes.

MI: Yes, because by starting—by the time '63 rolled around, they just piled in with the rest of us.

MF: Yes. Did there seem to be any kind of tension at all?

MI: None that I was ever aware of.

MF: Yes, a lot of people have told me that—

MI: Because, I mean, they got there the same way that we did. They made as good as grades that we did and scored well and—I never remember that when I was there.

MF: Yes, a lot of people have told me that they had the impression that any perceived tension was more a perception in the minds of the administration than the students.

MI: I had none. And yet for most of us, I think, probably it might have been a first experience being in school with blacks because I graduated from high school in '63, and I never had a black student in my classes. We weren't integrated in Rocky Mount when I graduated from high school. And so going to school was a first experience I'd had, but I was never, ever aware of any tension with black students whatsoever.

MF: '63 there were very few schools in North Carolina that had any kind of integration.

MI: But I never, never saw any tension, and as best I can recall—and it might be interesting to talk to some of the black students who were there then—they were included in things and fun to be around. And I don't remember any tensions whatsoever.

MF: Most of what I've heard from any black students who were there at that time was that if they made an effort to be included, then they were, but otherwise there was nothing really overtly racially tense, but that it was more just that they had to actually make the effort to be included.

MI: Which was probably true—what was true for all of us. If you wanted to sit in your dorm room, a lot of times people didn't come in and drag you out—

MF: Yes.

MI: —and say, "You just got to come with us and let's, you know."

MF: Sure, yes.

MI: As I say, maybe that's my perspective, and it might have been different for someone else but—

MF: Is there anything you can think of that I'm forgetting that's real important or that you just

want to make sure you mention?

MI: I don't know. I just loved it there, and I loved it because of what it was then. I loved the idea of being at a girls' school most of the week, and then—. In other words, I think we enjoyed the best of both worlds at that point in time because we enjoyed the status of a university and a coeducational in name because it certainly was in name only when I was there, and I enjoyed that.

MF: Yes. [laughs]

MI: And that's why I chose to go there, I think, because I liked that freedom during the week and not having the pressure of wanting to impress or influence anyone and just enjoying it the entire week, and I loved that.

MF: Yes.

MI: I'm not—growing up now maybe I wouldn't want that were I to come along today. But at that point in time I did, and it fulfilled it, and I loved it. I really did.

MF: Okay.

MI: If I were the same gal today that I was in 1963, I wouldn't be happy attending UNCG, I don't think because it wouldn't offer me what—if I still wanted those same things. Do you know what I'm saying?

MF: Sure.

MI: In other words, were I the same person and looking for a university today, it's not what I—

MF: It's changed too much.

MI: It's not what I went to. It's not where I went. I go back and visit every now and then, and nothing is familiar very much. Even the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation and so forth, that's all changed now. It's not what I knew.

MF: I think that school has undergone more change than—

MI: Oh, tremendous—

MF: —in the recent years than probably any other that I can think of.

MI: So it's not where I went to school really. I mean, it's not the same. Not the same at all, and I was in love with it then, and I'm in love with the memories of it now.

MF: Okay. Well, thanks so much.

MI: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]