

UNCG CENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Mary Lou Merrell

INTERVIEWER: Ann Phillips

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AP: You want to introduce yourself? Mary Lou is secretary in the English department.
[recording error] In the English department, where was the office located then?

MM: In the same place, in McIver Building.

AP: Same place?

MM: Well, it was a smaller office when I first started. I don't remember the number, but it was a small office around the corner from where we are now. I think it was probably in the very late '60s that we took over a half of the classrooms to enlarge our office space.

AP: Yes. You said that you are from Greensboro? Tell me about growing up; tell me about your childhood a bit and growing up.

MM: I am a native of Greensboro. Went to Curry School [laboratory school on Woman's College of the University of North Carolina/The University of North Carolina at Greensboro], just grew up in this area. Married the boy next door. [chuckles]

AP: Storybook romance?

MM: Yes, right, and then during World War II [1939-45 global conflict], my husband was stationed at Treasure Island [United States Naval Base] in San Francisco [California]; so we lived there about a little more than two years. All of which time I was extremely homesick.

AP: Oh.

MM: Because I was so young. But it was a good experience and then when we returned to Greensboro—oh, around six years later, I guess, we started a family. We had two sons.

AP: About what year did you return?

MM: 1947.

AP: What was Greensboro like when you came back?

MM: It was still very much a small town. In fact, San Francisco was a real shock to me because when we left here, Greensboro was such a small place, you knew everybody. If you went downtown, you knew everybody you met on the street. Men were still very polite. And in San Francisco, they'd race you for a seat on the bus or the street car, and that was a real shock to me.

AP: Men were maybe more polite to women or just polite to everybody?

MM: Well, both I think, just in general. I think that's still a Southern trait.

AP: Yes.

MM: We tend to be—maybe because life hasn't been as hectic and as busy as in larger—

AP: I wondered about that. But San Francisco was a shock. So you went out there then about '45, 1945?

MM: Yes. We were married. Well no, we went there, let's see. Married in '43, went out there about a year later, so it was late '44. And then we came back. Now I'm wondering if I got the year wrong. Maybe we came back in '46.

AP: Well, about that time. You said that you went to Curry School. What was Curry School like when you went there? How old were you?

MM: Well, I started there in the first grade; I went all the way through. I graduated the last year that they had eleven grades. That was in 1942, and it was sort of like a big family. And through the years, I don't know that it changed all that much. My sons went there. The classes were usually about thirty students, and many of the students who started there in the first grade went all the way through and graduated from Curry. And so you really knew the people that you were in school with.

AP: Who were your teachers there at Curry?

MM: Let's see. My first grade teacher was Miriam McFadden. Second grade teacher was Ruth Gunter [Class of 1914]. Third grade teacher was Betty Lamb. Fourth grade I don't remember—oh, [Miss Mary] Fitzgerald [Class of 1908]. Many of these people have just in recent years passed away. Fifth grade was a Miss Kruger.

AP: Were they on the faculty here or were they students here?

MM: No, these people were, I think, considered faculty of Woman's College, and then we had student teachers who came in to teach and all of the students at that time were students at WC [Woman's College].

AP: Yes.

MM: And we gave the student teachers a hard time. [laughs]

AP: I bet you did. The usual way.

MM: More so in high school than in grammar school.

AP: Yes. So it was a close-knit group of faculty and students.

MM: Yes, and most of the students at Curry School—well, there were a lot of faculty children there, but most of the students lived in this general area. And we walked to school and we went home for lunch. We didn't have a cafeteria.

AP: Yes.

MM: We had an hour and a half for lunch.

AP: And hour and a half. How nice. [chuckles]

MM: And it was—another way that I think the South, the pace of life, It was always—I think it has changed a great deal now, but I think the pace of life in the South—it's still a little bit slower, and I think that's wonderful.

AP: Yes, yes, a good difference from busier places. So after Curry School, tell me about your coming here to Woman's College and how that happened?

MM: Well, let's see. I—when we first came back to Greensboro, I worked for just a short time for an accountant, a CPA, and then I stopped working when we started a family. Stayed home with the children for, I don't know, a number of years, and then when the children, the younger one, well, they were both here at Curry, but when David, the younger one started, probably in the second or second grade at Curry, I started working around campus, just filling in. I had some friends who worked over here, and that was just ideal for me because I could work any hours that I was free to work, and I learned a lot working around the campus. I worked, oh, a little bit in the biology department, in PE [physical education] for Ethel Martus, who had been my teacher at Curry.

AP: Oh, I see. I understand she was really wonderful?

MM: Yes, she was.

AP: Just very well known nationally and internationally in her field. What made her so special, do you think?

MM: Well, she—all of the teachers back then seemed to me to be very dedicated and cared very much about the students. They were—all of it was like a big family, and they were interested in our lives away from school as well as at school. And then some of the student teachers—let's see, Ellen Griffin [Class of 1940] was one of our student teachers

at Curry. And she went on to be a rather famous golfer, golf instructor, maybe more than player. But I'm trying to remember, it seems to me like there was another person who was one of our student teachers who then became a member of the faculty here, but I can't seem to quite recall. Anyhow, I worked around campus, filling in; worked in the Graduate School and in the Accounting Office, and then I worked in the English department, while the secretary was out for surgery. Joseph Bryant was the head of the department at that time. Of all the places that I filled in, the English department was my favorite. I really liked it. And so in 1963, when the secretary for whom I had filled in went on to another job, he called and asked me if I would come to work in the English department. And I still could not work full time, but I worked part time for about two years and then started on a full-time basis on 1965.

AP: In '65? So that was after coeducation?

MM: Yes.

AP: Well, if we go back—it seemed that when you first came here to the campus, what was it like? What was your feeling the first day on campus to work here? How did you feel?

MM: It was exciting. It was so much smaller then, and, of course, it was still a women's college at that time. I think it was. Was it 19—? I can't remember the year that we became coeducational.

AP: Early '60s, [Editor's note: the college became coeducational in 1963] I guess. How was that decision made for the college to go coed? Who made that decision, do you think?

MM: Well, Otis Singletary was chancellor at the time, and he—I didn't come in contact with him very much, but he seemed to be a very dynamic person and he wanted changes made, and he—it was under his administration that the English department put in the master's program and then the PhD program and also Joseph Bryant was still the head of the English department when those programs were implemented here. Now whether the decision to go coeducational and change the name of the institution was Singletary's alone, I don't know.

AP: Well, how did the faculty feel about the school's going coed?

MM: I think some of the older faculty didn't like it very much, and one reason was that Woman's College had a national reputation and it was sort of a one of a kind. And I think they felt that if it became coeducational, it would be just one of many. And, of course, when it became coeducational, it changed. A lot of us, including me, don't always accept change too well.

AP: Yes. I think you're right about that. What about the students? What about the young women? How did they feel about coeducation?

MM: I don't think they were real thrilled about it at the time. And I think many of the alumni

were much opposed to it, and certainly they were opposed to changing the name.

AP: Yes.

MM: But, of course, the name change had to be made if it was to be coeducational.

AP: Yes, that's right.

MM: But they weren't happy about that, a lot of them.

AP: What do you think made Woman's College so special as a women's college? What was that quality? Or how would you describe this women's college?

MM: Well, I think the quality of instruction here was just especially good, and the graduates who went into teaching carried that with them. They were good teachers. And also we had students—and they may still, I'm not sure about that—but we certainly had students from all over the country to come, and that's always enhanced the quality of education, I think.

AP: Yes.

MM: And we still have that, probably campus-wide, but we had that very much in the MFA [master of fine arts] program in the English department. We had students from all over, all over the world really. We had foreign students.

AP: They were attracted to the quality, the nature of the program. So in some ways the faculty way back at Woman's College time, the faculty was different because the school was small the faculty could be more involved. Did the faculty live on campus mostly?

MM: No, but mostly they lived near campus. The whole atmosphere, I guess, was different because there wasn't the pressure to publish in those days. The faculty were pretty much, I think, promoted just on the basis of their teaching effectiveness, and that surely doesn't happen anymore. [chuckles] And they put their time, energy and effort into teaching.

AP: It does make a difference

MM: And I'm afraid that's not true across the board anymore because they don't get promoted, they don't get tenure if they don't publish. So that makes the whole atmosphere different.

AP: Yes, different for the quality of teaching or different for the students?

MM: Well, I personally think it hurts the teaching to some extent. The graduate students are supposed to benefit from the publication, but I'm not sure that I view it that way. I think the teaching is the most important thing we do here, but I'm not sure the administration thinks so. [laughs]

AP: Yes.

MM: That's probably not very politic of me to say that.

AP: It's a good point. I mean I think that many colleges and universities are wrestling with that and that are facing up to it, or we have to face up to it. I think it is a struggle.

MM: Well it is if your focus has to be on publishing. It's not possible to do everything and do everything well. Now I do think that when I first came to work here, I think the students were much better. And I think that's partly, though, because they came better prepared. They would have been better prepared in the secondary schools than they are now.

AP: So maybe there was a change in curriculum over those decades?

MM: I think—I guess it was late '60s when the education in the public schools was more liberal and students had more choice, and then that same thing happened here. I guess that was about in the early '70s when the curriculum was changed to give students more choices and allow them to plan their own programs and, in my view, that's a real mistake because they may be intelligent, but they don't have the wisdom that you need to do that. That's what the faculty is here for. And I think we just about gone full circle [chuckles] because I think we are getting back to more rigid requirements. When I first came to work here, we had a requirement of twelve hours of English, six hours of composition and six hours of literature. To me that is most important, but now the students can take—let's see, I'm not sure exactly what the requirements are, but I think all students have to take English 101, but they can take it any time during their four years.

AP: Any time?

MM: To me, that is ridiculous. I think they need it when they're freshmen because if they don't learn to write, then they don't do any of their work well. And to have students take 101 in the second semester of their senior year seems ludicrous to me.

AP: I didn't realize there was that requirement.

MM: I'm not sure exactly what the requirements are now because it changes, and I don't even attempt to keep up with it.

AP: That would make a difference?

MM: But the students—really, I think back in the '60s, they just—they were better. They just came better prepared, and they, most of them I think, were here because they wanted to be. I'm not sure all the students want to be here now. I think that a lot of students are here because their parents didn't have the opportunity to go to college, so they want to be sure their children go to college. Or they're here because they don't know what they want to do and are kind of biding time. So many of them have to work, which is not all bad. I think that is very good too, but we have so many commuting students who have to have

cars in order to get here, and then they have to work long hours to pay for the cars, and then their academic work suffers, I think.

AP: The commuting certainly did change the college, don't you think, throughout the years?

MM: Yes, I think it has changed it a great deal.

AP: What about that feeling of—in the times before the women did go off campus? They just came here and they studied and lived and walked downtown and walked to Tate Street?

MM: Yes, the activity was all right around the campus in those days and, yes, a lot of students would walk downtown. Oh, one of my fondest memories is of the May Day that they would have out here in the park in front of McIver Building. And we'd all come over to watch. They would put up a May pole, and they had a May queen. That was all a lot of fun and very special to all the kids who lived in this neighborhood because we were children of the Depression [worldwide economic downturn preceding World War II], so we had to take advantage of things that didn't cost anything. [laughs]

AP: I see.

MM: And we also could come over to Aycock [Auditorium] and watch their dress rehearsals, and we enjoyed doing that. And at Christmastime before they cut the street through there to make a turn lane, there was a great big cement area out in front of Aycock, and all the kids who lived in the neighborhood—we lived on Joyner Street—would get skates for Christmas and we'd come and skate around that in a circle. And we'd go to Peabody Park and have picnics. And the university or the college then was very much a part of the community. You, well, felt like it belonged to us. It was part of our life.

AP: Yes.

MM: And I don't know that the people in the area around the university now feel that way, partly because of the parking problems and the inconvenience it is to them.

AP: Getting a ticket—one ticket getting slapped on the car real fast.

MM: Well, in fact if you live in this area right on perimeter of the campus, it's very difficult sometimes just to have guests come because they don't have any place to park.

AP: Yes. So that's certainly changed with the bigness, the growth of the college, into the university. From what you are saying, there is a difference about the feeling that the university perhaps tended to welcome or mix more with the town.

MM: Yes, I think the—well, certainly the people who lived in those days right around the college had a very warm feeling towards the college.

AP: [laughs] Even the children felt welcome? Oh yes, a happy time in May and the skating?

MM: Yes, it was a time I'm sure we all remember fondly.

AP: Tell me a little bit more about the different administrations that you've seen here. When you came here, Dr. Singletary was head of the school.

MM: Right, right.

AP: And then you said he was a very dynamic and strong leader?

MM: He was, and then he left to go, I've forgotten what the position was that he took in Washington [DC]. Either one- or two-year appointment to do something in the federal government. And James Ferguson, who was dean of the Graduate School at the time, took over as acting chancellor while he was away, and then I can't remember exactly—I'm not sure that Singletary ever really came back [Editor's note: Singletary was on leave of absence 1964-1966 to become Director of Economic Opportunity and returned for one year], but anyhow James Ferguson became chancellor, and he was just the finest Southern gentleman in the world. He really was so dear. Everybody liked him very much. I know that I was introduced to him. Well, he was dean of the Graduate School when I was filling in in the Graduate School, and I was always impressed because he always remembered that I had two sons, and any time I would see him thereafter—for years thereafter, he would always ask about my sons, and that made me feel warm toward him.

AP: That is amazing.

MM: But he really was just a fine man. I can't remember who came after Ferguson left.

AP: Well, Dr. [William] Moran, I guess, came after. Was that right? Dr. Ferguson served until 1979? There wasn't anybody else in between there? If we go back, you came here after Dr. [Edward Kidder] Graham [Jr.] and Dr. [William Whatley] Pearson. What was Dr. Graham's administration like? Were you on campus?

MM: I was not on campus then. It could be that he may have been here when I was filling in around campus, and I was just not aware of who the chancellor was at the time.

AP: I know there was some discussion about curriculum then—that he wanted to make some changes in the curriculum, Dr. Graham did. Did he meet much resistance on that?

MM: I really don't know about that. I expect he did, though, because I think change always meets with resistance, no matter what. [laughs]

AP: Probably so.

MM: And also I think that a lot of the resistance to change is political. Departments don't want to lose ground. If the English department gets a six-hour requirement, that may infringe on another department's enrollment. So I think that's the reason for a lot of it. And then I think a lot of it is because people have ideas they feel strongly about, the role of

education.

AP: Well, so you saw a number of administrations set in place here. And the faculty began—I guess you observed the faculty over a period of years that those changes took place gradually—maybe from more of an emphasis on teaching to more emphasis on research and publishing?

MM: Oh, there has definitely been a real trend towards that and, frankly, I think the teaching has suffered. And I don't understand why there is the necessity for all the publishing. It seems to me that the ideal solution would be to have maybe one or two people in a big department who are there to publish and do research and then let the other people in the department put their focus on teaching. But that's not looked upon kindly. [laughs]

AP: That's an idea, certainly a creative idea.

MM: Because the people who do a lot of publishing do so somewhat at the expense of their colleagues because somebody has got to do the basic work. And the basic work is not rewarded. And I can see that. Well, anybody can see that who looks at the—. They say the three criteria for publication, for promotion would be equal: publication, teaching and service. But if you look at the credentials of the people who are promoted, you will see that it's publication. It's like real estate: location, location, location is what counts. [laughs]

AP: Well, that is interesting. I wonder where that push comes from maybe here at this university. Where has that push for publication come from, do you reckon?

MM: Well, in retrospect, I think it certainly started with Singletary, and partly because he wanted to build graduate programs. And that was a mandate that was handed to the English department—to implement these programs. And I see the necessity for that, but it just seems to me that the publish or perish way of thinking is just—might have been all right at one time. But it seems to me that it long ago should have stopped.

AP: It's gotten out of hand? [chuckles]

MM: I really think it has because I think people nowadays would rather do most anything—teaching is looked upon as demeaning. And I think that's too bad. I think teaching—as I say, to me the most important thing that goes on on this campus is the teaching. I'm not sure that my view is very popular. [chuckles]

AP: And that attitude towards teaching, involvement in teaching, has certainly changed over the years, you feel?

MM: Yes.

AP: I'm saying in the early days, but in the '60s, the time when you came onto the campus, was there a majority of women faculty, mostly women? I mean, would you guess what

percentage of the faculty were women?

MM: I don't know that I could guess the percentage, but I would think at least maybe three-fourths of the faculty was female.

AP: Were they single or married?

MM: Most of the women were single. I guess they were sort of the stereotype of what we used to think of as the old maid schoolteachers. I think the—probably three-fourths were women, and then most of the men, though, I think were married and had children who were at Curry School. And I'm sure some of the women were married too, but the ones that I can think of—well, all of my teachers at Curry School were single.

AP: Is that right?

MM: Yes. We had one man, well, I take that back. We had two men who taught in the high school. One was a biology teacher, and his name was John Smith. And Herbert Kimmel, who was the math teacher. and then a coach, [Herbert] Parks, was the athletic director at Curry. But other than that—and the principal was a man—but other than that the teachers were all single women.

AP: I wonder how that made their lives different or how it made their teaching different.

MM: Well, it could be that because they were single and they didn't have children in their personal lives—that could be partly the reason they took such interest in the lives of the students at the school.

AP: And they had time to do that?

MM: Yes, we had lots of extracurricular activities which they attended well, and that may still be true in public schools. I don't know about that. But we little tea dances after school on Fridays. Back in those days, your life sort of revolved around school, and I don't know that that's true anymore.

AP: That does seem to be a difference.

MM: And that was part of the reason you felt the closeness—you did everything you did with your family and with your schoolmates. At lunch the other day we were talking about babysitters, and those of us who were older said that back when we were growing up, you never heard of a babysitter. Your family didn't do anything that you couldn't do as a family. Or your parents didn't do anything that you couldn't do as a family. So now it's all changed.

AP: Yes, that really has changed quite a bit. Were the women who were on the faculty from North Carolina? Were many of them North Carolina natives or had they come to this area from out of state, do you think?

MM: I really don't know, but I think; I know that Fitzgeralds, she was a sixth grade teacher and she had a sister who taught, I believe, at the college. They all lived pretty much around campus, but I'm not sure if they were North Carolina natives or not. I really don't know about that.

AP: What about the dress code here on this campus and the dress in the activities and so on? What did students wear at this time, the '60s?

MM: They were—how should I put it—more appropriately dressed. [laughs]

AP: Okay.

MM: And some instructors would not allow students—that was the days of the bouffant hairdos, and I think that some of the instructors even would on their syllabus would say that students could not come to class with those big curlers. [chuckles]

AP: Oh my goodness. [chuckles]

MM: They—I don't think they wore shorts. They didn't dress as casually as they do now. And you'd never see anyone without shoes. And that's fairly common now. [chuckles]

AP: That would be a difference.

MM: I don't recall if they really got dressed up, but they dressed—probably even saddle shoes, I can't remember if they were in, but that kind of sort of collegiate look.

AP: Yes.

MM: That you think of as the typical college student.

AP: You were saying earlier that some of the students who come now may be first generation in their family to go to college. Was that a change for, say, for young women who came here in the '40s and '50s? Had they have been the first women in their family to go to school, or do you know?

MM: I think maybe to some extent. Well, for instance, being a child of the Depression back when I graduated from Curry, only people who had the money to pay tuition or the people who were extremely bright and got scholarships—and it was different in those days because there weren't nearly as many scholarships, and they weren't nearly as many places where you could get help to attend college. I wanted very much—I didn't want to go four years of college, but I did want to take the one-year commercial. But we couldn't afford it, so I didn't do that. And then I think maybe it's people like—I wanted very much for my sons to have a college education, and I think that whole generation maybe that had that feeling—that because you couldn't have it, you wanted to be sure that it was provided for your children. And I don't know how I would have felt about it at the time, but in retrospect I think that providing it for your children, if they want it, is important.

To demand that they go to college if they don't really want to is not right because if they're not interested, they're not going to take advantage of it.

AP: It must have been difficult for you, if you wanted to go—even one-year course and just couldn't do it for lack—it must have been frustrating. How did you feel?

MM: Well, it was, but I was not alone. There were a lot of people in the same situation, so it probably bothered me less because of that, because I wasn't the only person who couldn't do that. And when I think back on it, I don't feel that I missed a lot because I've had a happy life, and I think you can—you don't necessarily have to be in school to learn.

AP: Right, absolutely. Absolutely.

MM: Pretty much that you just do what you had to do and make the best of it.

AP: Yes.

MM: Life is pretty much what you make of it.

AP: Yes. I get the feeling that you have made, that you do make the best of it every day.

MM: I've been fortunate to have a happy marriage, and fine sons, and good friends. That's important to me.

AP: Greensboro friends, I mean, just—

MM: I have friends—in fact, I had dinner with one of them last night that I have known since—probably since we were about four years old. I have two very close friends that—we've been friends that long. Well, they're like family to me, really. And since my husband died, I don't have any family here in Greensboro, so these friends are like family to me, and that's important to me to have friends, close friends that care about you.

AP: That's a wonderful gift, and it's something that money cannot buy.

MM: I think that's one thing that's important in life, when you realize that money doesn't buy happiness. My children would tell me, "Mother, that's so corny," [laughs] but when I realized at about age—I think probably was around thirty-five years old, when it finally dawned on me. I derived more pleasure from giving than I did from receiving, and that made a big difference in my life.

AP: It must have made a difference too in your work here at Woman's College. I can see why people wanted you to come to work in the office because you added a special quality, and my feeling is that you were very positive about your work and took your work seriously here.

MM: Yes, I always have, and part of that comes from growing up during the Depression. Back

in the days when I first started looking for a job, you either worked—you did your work and you were efficient and reliable, or you didn't have a job and so that's just carried over throughout my life. That's the way it—you lived.

AP: Yes, and some of those attitudes you must have gotten from family?

MM: Oh yes, my mother thought that you had to have an extraordinary excuse not to go to school [laughs] or not to go to work, and after when I had children, if she would call and I'd say "John is sick today," her first question would be not, "What's wrong with him?" but, "Did he miss school?" [laughs]

AP: That's a good story.

MM: A lot of that I think does come from growing up in the Depression. And if you survive it, you realize what's important, and it sort of makes you a better person if you've lived through something like that.

AP: Maybe that difference between your experience could be so different from youngsters of today who do have more material things, even perhaps even the poorest of students have more things than you had. Do you feel that?

MM: Yes. We really did not have much money really, and I'm not sure the students today realize what a special opportunity it is for them to be able to go to college and—just almost anything we did back when I was growing up was special. But I think in some ways that we must have been happier because we enjoyed the simple things and the things that money—you don't need money for. I always think of the fact that money is only important to those that don't have it. [laughs] Money is important, but it gets out of proportion sometimes. You think, "If I just had money, I could do this." But money is not all powerful.

AP: Maybe it is hard for our students to understand that in these days?

MM: Everybody seems so prosperous nowadays. [laughs] Everybody—I shouldn't say everybody because we still do have a lot of poverty.

AP: You do see young students driving around in pretty expensive cars.

MM: Kids nowadays do seem to have a lot of money. Of course, it takes a lot of money—the books are so much more expensive. I'm astounded at the price of paperback books now. That is one thing that I was aware of when I first came to work here, and I still am aware of it. Mostly the faculty are very much aware of the cost of textbooks. And they try to hold down the cost—not require the students to—of course, it is very difficult in some cases they get just one textbook, it is so expensive. But they do seem to be concerned about that.

AP: Yes, that's good. Speaking about work and students getting money or having the money

they need, did many students work in the dining hall and other places, say in the '60s? Has that changed?

MM: I think a lot of students did work in those kinds of jobs. I can remember when we lived on Joyner Street and Tate Street, there were a lot of residents in the area who would have students who roomed and boarded with them, and they would do little jobs that didn't seem to distract as much from their scholastic work as it does now. Of course, just the fact that there's so much commuting. Commuting time takes a lot—just the time spent getting back and forth and the time that you spend if cars break down. Now it's a problem if you have inclement weather because there are students on campus and usually classes do go on, but the commuting students can't get here. So then you've in effect almost lost a class even if the class met because you've got to—at the next class meeting review what the students who were out missed. So I see that as a real problem with the commuting students.

AP: Students come from Winston-Salem and Durham, Burlington, High Point?

MM: If you have had weather, they really just can't get here. We're better now than we were, but we aren't set up for snow or anything like the Northern states are.

AP: Well, we've sort of touched on books and faculty. What about curriculum? We did talk about that. You were saying there used to be more English courses required, two semesters of composition. Do you know about curriculum in other departments or just throughout the whole college, how those requirements have changed and how those changes—? [recording error]

MM: I think curriculum changes may have come about from pressure from students. I think the students were beginning to want to be more independent and not have things as structured as—and, of course, it's my old-fashioned upbringing, I guess, but I feel that's what the faculty is here for, to guide the students. The faculty, they've lived longer, they have experiences that have given them wisdom to guide the students. And for students to come in and think that they ought to plan their own programs with no guidance just doesn't make any sense to me. And I think—as I said, I think that we have gone full circle. I think we've worked back to the point now where students want the guidance. They want help in planning their programs, and I think the curriculum requirements are more stringent now than they were for a while. But I think the pressure really came from the students, I think.

AP: Sitting on your side of the desk is an interesting place to be because you can do a lot of observing of faculty and of students and administration.

MM: You get to know who the students consider the really good teachers. I am amazed at how reluctant the students are to say anything, like to the head of the department, if they are displeased with a teacher. They'll come in and talk to one of the secretaries. And if we say, "I understand that you have a problem with this, but I really can't help you; you need to talk to the head of the department." They don't want to do it.

AP: I see.

MM: [laughs] They drop it then.

AP: Wonder how you account for that? Why they wouldn't go to the department head?

MM: I really—I don't know unless they just feel more intimidated by that authority. But you really can see, get a good perspective on what's going on, from being the secretary.

AP: Yes, yes.

MM: And just walking in the halls with the students overhearing their conversations about who they like and who they don't.

AP: The grapevine travels fast. May be pretty reliable. I'm wondering if students in, say, in the '60s or if you've heard about it in the '50s, if they were on the whole quite pleased with faculty members or—?

MM: I think they were because I think they had almost that same close rapport in those days that the students at Curry had with teachers there. There was just that—well, the faculty back in—I am sure some of them must have published to some extent and had been doing some research, but their main focus was on teaching and on the students. And the students were aware of that, and I think they responded well to that.

AP: Yes.

MM: They felt important; they felt like they were important. And I don't know that they have that feeling now because I think that sometimes some faculty might even say they don't have time to do this or that because they are working on an article or—but I guess it's because they feel the need to do that. Everybody wants to gain tenure and be promoted. They know how you do it. [chuckles]

AP: And the students may seem sort of an intrusion in their lives? The fact that they are there?

MM: Yes, well, it's almost as though you have to put first things first. You have to set your priorities. And then if you want to be promoted or if you don't have tenure, if you want to have tenure, you have got to get published. So you do what it takes to get published. [laughs]

AP: I'm hearing you say that is a change from the old days?

MM: That's very much different than it was. I don't think there was ever that pressure to publish back in the '40s and '50s. Of course, there could have been and I was not aware of it, but I don't think there was. I think the people who were here then—well, by the standards that we have now, none of the people who were full professors in the English Department when I came to work here, with the exception of Randall Jarrell [American

poet, literary critic, children's author, essayist, novelist, and the 11th Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a position that now bears the title Poet Laureate], would be a full professor now. They wouldn't even, some of them, be hired now. So that's how the system has changed really greatly in that way.

AP: That does sound like a big change.

MM: But I don't know that back in those days that many of the faculty had PhDs. Some of them did certainly, but I don't think—the percentage would have been much, much smaller than it is now.

AP: Yes. So things have changed. You said that in North Carolina there was, especially as a result of Dr. [William] Friday's [head of the University of North Carolina System] leading, there was an emphasis on building? [Editor's note: William Friday did not hold a doctorate]

MM: The bulk of the money went into higher education. So naturally if you sort of, not really neglect but you don't really support the secondary, primary schools, then we began not to have students really prepared to go on to higher education, and I think that's turning around now, but just now. They are just beginning to put some money back into the basic—the public schools. You can't have all of these things at the higher education level if you don't prepare the students to go on to it.

AP: It doesn't make any sense.

MM: So I think in many instances we do get students from out of state who are better prepared for university than some of the North Carolina students.

AP: Yes. You have seen many students come and go. Many.

MM: But I do think that's been a real problem for many years, and I think that—of course, North Carolina still has a very good reputation for its university system, but you can't just survive on the university system. You've got to prepare your students to go on forward, and I really don't think we've done that. So many of the students really can't write, and sometimes they don't even know how to write a sentence, which I think is just pitiful. Because I remember, I think it was in the second or third grade back when I was in school that we learned to write thank you notes and business letters and—

AP: At Curry?

MM: Yes, and some of the letters of application that we get from PhDs are not well written.

AP: Is that right? That's alarming, perhaps?

MM: But I think that it's because there hasn't been the emphasis on writing and the importance of writing. It's just so important for the students to know how—that's why I think it's

just ridiculous that they don't have the composition requirement of six hours and the students be required to take it in their freshman year. A lot of parents don't understand that either because we get telephone calls from parents who are upset because they'll say, "My son was not able to get into 101 during his freshman year, and now he tells me he is a first-semester sophomore and he still can't get in a 101 class." I think we've kind of caught up with that backlog now to where students can take the 101 early in their career.

AP: I know I wanted to ask you about civil rights times here when—not only when black students were first admitted to the university, but just about Greensboro in general. We've just celebrated the February 1st Sit-ins, been aware of that thirty-year time since the Sit-ins at Woolworths. What was the feeling between the races here in Greensboro, say in the '50s and '60s?

MM: I think that Greensboro gets a lot of bad publicity. It seems to me that we worked out the race problem better than many areas. I don't think the race problem is a Southern problem. I think they have just as much of a problem in the North and West and Mid-West. It seems to me that we've integrated well here.

AP: Yes.

MM: I do remember when we had a—this is about 1968, I guess, 1967 or 1968—we had hired an assistant professor who had come here from Oregon. And he heard about—I guess it was some kind of riot that was going on at A&T [North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University] or in that general area, and there was gunfire and a real upheaval. And he called and he was concerned about coming to Greensboro because from hearing about it on the national news, he thought there was just gunfire on every corner.

AP: I see. [chuckles]

MM: At the time we were living on Hillside Drive, which is not all that far from the downtown area where this was going on. We weren't even aware of what was going on except what we heard on the news, and so I think that we do get a lot of really bad publicity. Everything that happens is blown sort of out of proportion.

AP: I know that some of the professors here, especially Dr. [Warren] Ashby [chairman of the Department of Philosophy, director of the Honors Program, director of the Residential College, acting head of the Department of Religious Studies] and Dr. [Eugene] Pfaff [history faculty], were, had meetings, had lunches, just informal lunches, with other—with members of the black community. And so I'm asking how much were faculty members aware of racial tensions or racial divisions, I might say, and what did faculty do? What did students do? Did any students participate in the Sit-ins, for instance, at Woolworths?

MM: I am not aware of any students from UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] participating, and I'm not aware that UNCG has had anything, any major problems. It seems to me—well, for instance, I can really base my opinion on only what

goes on in our office, but we treat every student who comes in there just alike. They come in there to ask a question or to get help, and we help them. It doesn't matter if it's a black person, white person, Oriental. The main problem we have is with the Orientals, who only understand what they want to understand. [laughs]

AP: I see. [laughs]

MM: If you don't say what they want to hear, they don't understand. Now maybe that's not true in every office, I don't know. But I'm not aware that the faculty in the English department, and certainly not in our departmental offices, that we treat anybody any differently.

AP: When blacks first came here to Woman's College or to UNCG, how were blacks accepted here?

MM: They seem to me to be accepted. One of the main things that I noticed when we first became coeducational—for instance, if you were going through a door, there were so few male students, they would hold the door for you. Then as we got more and more male students, they realized that they'd be holding the door all day long [chuckles] if they didn't go on through, but I am really not aware that there's been any unpleasantness with blacks.

AP: And black faculty—has there been any active push to recruit more black faculty, do you think?

MM: That's really a sort of Catch-22 situation [paradoxical situation in which an individual cannot or is incapable of avoiding a problem because of contradictory constraints or rules] because the—and the English department has really actively sought to hire black people, but it's not easy to find black people who are qualified. But they are judged on exactly the same basis that a white candidate would be judged on. Unfortunately, the really well-qualified black people are so sought after by Harvard [University, Cambridge, Massachusetts] and Princeton [University, Princeton, New Jersey] and places like that, that have so much more prestige and that that's where they go.

AP: So there's competition for faculty?

MM: We have had—let's see, we had one black student in the MA [master of arts] program who is preparing to go into the PhD. program. Now if he goes all the way through and finishes, he'll be a good candidate for a job. We have had two part-time black instructors, and we have really sought to hire minority people, but they just aren't available.

AP: Yes. Has there ever been any exchange of faculty, say A&T and Woman's College or Bennett [College, Greensboro, North Carolina] and Woman's College or Greensboro College and Bennett?

MM: Not in the English department. We have people come over—in fact, we just recently had

a black instructor come over from A&T to lecture, but not an appointment to teach.

AP: Just visiting or maybe just a single lecture? I was wondering about that.

[recording error, recording paused]

AP: —your time here and thinking of your best time here, best experience and maybe your worst time or the worst thing here. Can you think of a best and worst thing that happened?

MM: Oh, I guess maybe the best time was—maybe when I first came here because my family and my children were still at home, and I had a very nice relationship with Joe Bryant who was the head, and as a matter of fact we still keep in touch. And maybe the worst times have been when we had acting heads that made the work more difficult. I guess the happiest time I remember—and that's because of my family, I guess—because the children were still at home and all. Of course, when you had an acting head that makes it hard on whoever the continuing person is. It would be sort of hard to move from one head to another without somebody, some stable influence, in the office. But all in all, my whole experience here has been pretty happy.

AP: You've given quite a bit to the place.

MM: I've enjoyed it, and it's been a learning experience for me.

AP: Thank you so much for sharing.

[End of Interview]