

## UNCG ALUMNI ASSOCIATION ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Ruth Vick O'Brien

INTERVIEWER: Jim Lancaster

DATE: March 30, 1973

[Jim Lancaster sent the questions to Mrs. O'Brien and she responded in writing]

JL: Why did you go to N.C.C.W.? [North Carolina College for Women, now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] in 1916?

RVO: When I was born, October 7, 1900, I was destined to go to N.C.C.W. even though the college was then the State Normal and Industrial College [Editor's note: from 1897 to 1919, the name of the institution was the State Normal and Industrial College] .

My mother, Mariah Goode Vick, was my father's second wife—married in 1898. My father, William Robert Vick, was a life-long friend of Dr. Robert H. Stancill, member [of the] First Board of Directors, 1891, State Normal and Industrial College. Both men were born and lived near Margaretville, North Carolina, a small cross-roads town in eastern North Carolina. Dr. Stancill told my father that if there were a daughter by the second marriage, he should send her to that college because tuition was free if the daughter promised to teach in North Carolina schools.

The principal of Seaboard High School, where I graduated in May 1916, was a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill. With the help of Principal Walter D. Barbee, I prepared to gain admission to N.C.C.W. in September 1916. When I arrived at N.C.C.W. in September 1916, I was still fifteen years of age, but sixteen on October 7, 1916. I should have graduated in 1920, but I was out of college for a year, owing to a serious operation in April 1918. Had it not been for Dr. [Anna] Gove, college physician, and the Wesley Long Hospital in Greensboro, I would not have survived. I returned to college in January 1918. Thus, I benefited from friendships in both classes, 1920 and 1921.

JL: What college rules and regulations carried you over to your later life?

RVO: I had been reared in a disciplined home—not harshly, but strictly. I may have objected to college regulations, but many disciplines I experienced have been important to me through the years. Walking period – 4:30-5:15 [was] every day except Saturday. Walking has remained my most important physical activity every day. Chapel attendance was compulsory, but we heard many famous speakers, and Dr. [Julius I.] Foust, president, gave us many thoughts for consideration, especially "Service" to the communities where we would live. Even today, it's difficult for me to turn down requests for community services. Adherence to study hours – 7:00-9:45 [in the] evenings. In my years of writing, I have allotted myself time to do research, study, writing, and I keep that routine.

JL: What changes have come about through these years, especially since the college has become UNC Greensboro?

RVO: I believe young people are more mature today than I was in 1916. At that time, I had never had a boyfriend or date. Nor was I permitted to visit friends if they lived in way-off towns.

There were no good libraries available, but I read what I could borrow from Principal Barbee. My parents provided a quiet place and a good lamp for study.

The only time I ever left my hometown of Seaboard, North Carolina, was to go with my parents to Ocean View, Virginia, on Sunday School excursions.

I heartily approve of more freedom for today's women students. They have the background needed to cope with changes. We had only Christmas vacations in my day. I believe vacations give students a wider horizon for thinking.

In November 1972, Mr. and Mrs. George Hamer [Mr. Hamer was vice chancellor for development] took me on a night tour of the university campus. Only two landmarks did I see: the Administration Building [Foust Building] and Spencer Dormitory.

I feel proud that my college has become a great university, providing a wealth of opportunities for student interests and development. Through the years, the *Alumni News* has kept me in touch with the changes in the college – social, physical, and educational.

JL: What N.C.C.W. faculty influenced your life?

RVO: Dr. Walter Clinton Jackson [history professor, dean of administration, and chancellor] stands foremost. He was the most fascinating teacher I ever knew. History came alive in his classes. In later years, Dr. Jackson remained my guide to higher efforts. When I took office as field secretary of the North Carolina Education Association in 1938, he was president. Later, when I became director of information for the North Carolina Office of Price Administration, I paid a visit to Dr. Jackson's office. He said, "You can reach the heights you desire, but there is a price you'll have to pay."

I realized how true that statement was when my husband, John T. O'Brien, died in September 1965. Together we had achieved successful careers and financial security. But we had only twenty years together—busy, hectic, stimulating years. The challenge Mr. O'Brien left me was, "Don't give up! Life is always changing."

Miss Harriet Elliott [political science professor and dean of women], as a teacher, developed my interest in social legislation benefitting all Americans, regardless of race, social position, or sex.

During my years working with Mr. O'Brien, Miss Elliott's teachings on social legislation was a source of strength to me. I knew the need for minimum wages, unemployment compensation, good housing for all, good schools, [and] benefits for the elderly such as Social Security and Medicare. Today, I benefit from Social Security and Medicare.

Dr. Eduard C. Lindeman, sociology [professor]. Because of Dr. Lindeman, my first career after graduation was as a Girls Work Secretary for the Y.W. C.A. I borrowed the money for study in New York from the College Student Loan Fund. My first and only Y.W.C.A. job was in Athens, Georgia. Because of a good salary, I quickly repaid the Fund loan.

I'll never forget Miss Laura [Hill] Coit [Class of 1896, professor, college secretary, and general assistant to the college's president], who trusted me for a loan with only my signature.

Other teachers I remember with gratitude [such as] Miss Emma King, dean of women. Strict, but understanding. She required dignity in dress and manners. Mr. A.C. Hall, who taught creative writing. "Write about the things you know about." So have I done many times in teaching play-writing to my high school classes in Seaboard, North Carolina. We won many awards from the Carolina Dramatic festivals, Chapel Hill, for our creative efforts. Miss Frances Womble, who taught me basic ways to do an outline. Two years ago, I completed a genealogy of the Vick family. Miss Womble's teaching helped me make a fair success of making the genealogy simple and easy to follow. Miss Magnhilde Gullander [history professor]. Under her guidance, the students organized the International Relations Club in 1920. I was a member of the first board of managers. We learned from noted speakers about the increasing power of Japan, Bolshevism in Russia, and the changes in Germany after World War I. When World War II came, I was intelligent as to the causes, and today my interest in Japan, Russia, and Germany continues. From Miss [Viola] Boddie [Latin and French professor], I learned a lot of Latin—four years of it—but I also learned the importance of being thorough and disciplined in habits.

JL: What other activities at N.C.C.W. have influenced your life?

RVO: I was a member of the Cornelian Society, and president in 1920-1921. The society provided: impressive initiations, banquets, plays by noted writers, and debates on timely subjects. I believe the Cornelian Society was the highlight of my college days: it provided friendships everlasting and an avenue to many interests that have followed me.

Young voters and women's suffrage. An important man, a friend of many years, said to me recently, "You never seem to get excited about the Women's Liberation Movement in the country." My reply was, "Why should I? Since I graduated from college in 1921, I have always done the things I wanted to do. No man has stood in my way. But many important men have helped me achieve my goals in life." But, while there are some avenues open to women, I'd like to see more select jobs available to qualified women in teaching in higher education, and in government, especially in the Federal Government.

JL: What were the cultural activities in your days at N.C.C.W.?

RVO: As I read the calendar of cultural events in the *Alumni News* scheduled at UNC Greensboro, I look back at my years at N.C.C.W. We were not culturally-starved. There were organ concerts by Professor George Scott-Hunter. He was an artist. His performance of "Pomp and Circumstance" still is fresh in my memory.

We had a concert by Ethel Lejinska. A great pianist—later the only woman conductor of an orchestra. I'll always remember her superb playing of the "Hungarian Rhapsody I and II." Then came Frieda Hempel, the great German-American soprano. When she sang "Home, Sweet Home" tears flowed down our cheeks.

Even Mme. Galli Curci came to the college. In my sophomore year, "The Birth of a Nation" came to Greensboro. We had to have parental permission to attend, so I saw

this movie from a seat in the front row balcony. The “Clansmen,” by Dixon, on which the movie is based, was part of my up-bringing since my parents had known the horrors of Sherman’s March to the Sea, the carpetbaggers, and the suffering of the Civil War aftermath.

We had our own dramatic productions presented by the Dramatic Club and the literary societies. Women always played the parts of men. The Cornelian [Literary] Society presented “School for Scandal.” My interest in dramatics has continued.

JL: Were there religious influences on the N.C.C.W. campus?

RVO: We had inspiration from our teachers to prepare ourselves for a better life. We had the Y.W.C.A and speakers from all religious groups. Sunday evening Vespers were events to remember.

I was, and still am, a member of the Seaboard United Methodist Church. While I taught in Seaboard (1926-1938), I taught the adult Sunday School classes and presented many religious plays.

In later years, I wrote a history of the Seaboard Methodist Church. My father was one of the founding fathers. It is a story of a strong but small congregation, which has survived as a focal point in community life.

[End of Interview]