

UNCG Centenary Project Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: May Williams Hicks

INTERVIEWER: Richard Bardolph

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RB: Let me say by way of introduction that I'm Richard Bardolph, I'm from the history department of The University [of North Carolina at Greensboro], and along with Bill Young from the university's television studio, and my wife Dorothy, we're spending the day here at Porter's Neck near Wilmington, North Carolina and we're the guests of Miss—Mrs. Mary—

MWH: May.

RB: May Williams Hicks. And we're at the Cornelia Nixon Davis Home, where she resides, and we're in her room now. And we'll just begin by inviting her to say something—first, I think she'd want to say something about the beautiful flowers in here.

MWH: Those flowers were given me yesterday. They came to me yesterday from two friends in Greensboro, my dear friend Lucy Womack and her brother Jim Womack. They are very much interested in this interview and they will be so glad when they can hear it themselves.

RB: I hope we won't disappoint them, I'm sure we won't. Let me just tell people who are watching that Mrs. Hicks is a graduate from the Class of 1905, in other words, she entered the university in 1901 when it was less than ten years old, and at the time, it had only a scattering of buildings. As I remember, when the university opened, it had only two buildings, the Foust—what is now the Foust Building, what has been the Administration Building, and a building called the Brick Dormitory. And by the time Mrs. Hicks, then Miss Williams, came to the campus, there were a scattering of other small buildings. But suppose we begin, Mrs. Hicks, by talking about the Administration Building. I think you told me that the range of things that went on in that building was absolutely astonishing. What was it that was carried on in that building, what functions were located in the Administration Building?

MWH: Well, as far as our classes were concerned, every class that I had the whole time I was there until the Students' Building was built, was held in—were held in this administration building.

RB: You're saying that all the instruction that you underwent in your four years in the university, all of it was under that one roof?

MWH: That's right.

RB: In the Administration Building. Until Students' Building was built some time later.

MWH: Later.

RB: Right.

MWH: That's right.

RB: Now, of course in addition to all the instruction, all the administrative offices, offices were concentrated there, too, weren't they? Isn't that where [founding president] Dr. [Charles Duncan] McIver held court and all the university functions were concentrated in that one place.

MWH: That's right, that's right.

RB: Were there other services that centered in that building? Was there, perhaps, an auditorium of any sort?

MWH: We had a wonderful auditorium, we thought. Dr. McIver was presiding over it many times, and we'd hear all the activities, all the concerts, anything in the world that we had—

RB: In that building.

MWH: Well, in that building.

RB: In that building. Do you remember what level it was on, was it on the main floor, the auditorium?

MWH: Yes, it—the classrooms [were] on the first floor, the administration offices, and then on the second floor there were also many rooms where the classes were held.

RB: But where would these—when you heard Dr. McIver, where would he be?

MWH: You mean in that building?

RB: Yes, yes.

MWH: Well, his private office was in the building.

RB: Yes. But I understood you to say that—there was no auditorium then.

MWH: Yes, there was a large auditorium on the second floor, that everything was held.

RB: There we have it.

MWH: And in those days, you know, we had marshals at the commencement exercises. Those exercises were always held in that auditorium.

RB: The commencement exercises were held in this Administration Building?

MWH: Yes, that's right.

RB: In the first few years.

MWH: And all during the year, there were services—oh, and Dr. McIver would have a speaker or a concert or something of that kind.

RB: I see.

MWH: And they had what they called marshals, I happened to be—

RB: One of them.

MWH: One of the marshals, when I was a senior, in my senior year. But all of it, any kind of a speaking or meeting of any particular—that all of us went, was in that big auditorium, on the second floor of the Administration Building, we called it then.

RB: Was there such a thing as a library in that building?

MWH: Yes, there was a small one.

RB: Such a library as the university had in those days, was it constituted—

MWH: Right in that building, yes.

RB: A modest collection of books, I think—

MWH: Didn't have a large library.

RB: —the college sent out an appeal to citizens and to students to bring in books from home to help build up the—[unclear]

MWH: I don't remember too much about the library. I remember that Miss Annie Petty was our librarian at that time.

RB: Petty, right. Miss Anna Petty?

MWH: Annie Petty, P-E-T-T-Y. Petty.

RB: Mary was a professor?

MWH: And she was the sister of Miss Mary Petty, who was—

RB: Chemistry?

MWH: Chemistry and so forth.

RB: Now, the other original building that was on the grounds the day the college opened and was in full function, of course, by the time you got there, was the Brick Dormitory, that a lot of people don't know about, because it didn't last very long, as I understand.

MWH: That's right.

RB: And the big event in the history of that building, of course, was its unfortunate destruction by fire. And you were there, at the time, right?

MWH: I was there.

RB: First, before we recount that story, what was housed in the old Brick Dormitory? Was it not the entire student population?

MWH: Yes. Well, there was another dormitory there.

RB: Oh. By 1904 there was another dormitory?

MWH: Well, it was a wooden dormitory, over near Dr. McIver's home.

RB: Oh, that was—the old Guilford [Dormitory] building.

MWH: It was—that was a wooden building, if I'm not mistaken.

RB: I see. You don't remember its name?

MWH: We called it Midway, but your wife's just now said that they—she named it, but I—

RB: I think it was called the Guilford building. I think we can identify that from an old picture that we have.

MWH: The Brick Dormitory was the main building.

RB: Yes. And it housed most of the students of the campus.

MWH: Yes.

RB: That would be perhaps as many as four or five hundred, right? [Editor's note: about 300 students were housed in Brick Dormitory.]

MWH: That's right.

RB: And it also was the dining hall where you ate.

MWH: Yes.

RB: And in short, it's where you lived and moved and had your being, in that building.

MWH: That's right.

RB: And then, you tell us what happened that night.

MWH: You mean you want to know about the fire.

RB: The fire.

MWH: Well, we awakened—my room was right at one of the openings, and I didn't have a bit of trouble in the world getting out, but the alarm came in, I've forgotten exactly how.

RB: What form the alarm took, you don't remember whether it was a bell, or?

MWH: I've forgotten just what happened, but I do know one of the girls rang out—ran out and rang the bell.

RB: Deep in the night, wasn't it?

MWH: Deep in the—about four o'clock in the morning.

RB: Four o'clock in the morning.

MWH: And I rushed out with my things, and all the girls on the first floor probably saved what they had. But those on the third floor lost everything in the world. One of my best friends, I started to go up the stairs to get her and met her coming down the stairs without anything on her at all. She lost everything in the world—just her nightclothes. And she lost everything in the world she had. And several of us, after we had gotten outside, we went across over on Spring Garden Street and sat on the porch of somebody's—really before daylight, and we watched the flames, and we did a little crying when we saw those flames taking—

RB: I dare say. I suppose the students on the second floor had a different success in getting their things out?

MWH: Yes, I don't remember too much about it. But I do remember that morning very well.

RB: Yes. Now, that suddenly deprived the college of the residential space for most of its students. How did it face that crisis?

MWH: Well, they told us the very next morning that we'd all have to go home for about three weeks.

RB: The college was suspended.

MWH: Yes. The college was suspended. Everybody went home. And when we—we stayed for three weeks, and when we came back, the Students' Building was in the process of being built. And they used the second floor of that Students' Building for little alcoves built of white canvas or something, just our bed and a little dresser in it. And all—practically all those that had been suspended, lived right in that second floor of the Students' Building.

RB: Two questions. Did the students who did not live in Brick Dormitory remain on campus during that three week suspension?

MWH: I've just forgotten. I'm not quite sure.

RB: Second, I understand you to say that Students' Building was in process of construction and though it was not yet completed, it was capable of being pressed into this emergency service.

MWH: Yes, that's right. In fact, like one great big hall on that whole second floor.

RB: And it was just—the areas were separated by canvas partitions.

MWH: Yes.

RB: That building, as you may know, is no longer in being either.

MWH: I understand that—

RB: Cornerstone still stands.

MWH: Is that right?

RB: And I believe it has a date on it, something like 1901 or 1902 [Editor's note: 1902 is the correct date], I'm not clear about that, but that's the building that then was pressed into service for that effort. Now, when you came back from the three week suspension, that area in the Students' Building continued to serve for the balance of the year, did it?

MWH: Yes. It stayed until commencement, that's when we went home. Yes, we were there the rest of the spring.

RB: Was any effort made to rebuild or to salvage the old Brick Dormitory?

MWH: No, I don't think so.

RB: It is now on the site where McIver—

MWH: I think so. The McIver Building is on that—

RB: These two successive McIver Buildings have stood, right, yes.

MWH: That's true. We were very proud of the Students' Building. We had our home economics in the first floor of it.

RB: [In the] Students' Building?

MWH: Yes.

RB: The instruction went on there? And that would include—

MWH: Yes, the Students' Building was completed. I remember that I took home economics down on the first floor, down on the basement, you might say. I expect there's a basement.

RB: Now, that would have to utilize considerable equipment, gas or—stoves, were they gas ranges?

MWH: I don't remember.

RB: But stoves for cooking, and things of that sort. Was that intended as a permanent arrangement? Or was that still part of the emergency that was created by the fire?

MWH: No, I think they—home economics was intended [to be] in that building, if I'm not mistaken.

RB: It was intended, I see, a serious permanent instructional—

MWH: But we did have a society hall [when the literary societies] moved into the Students' Building, I remember that.

RB: I see. They moved into the Students' Building for the first time then.

MWH: And then the meeting and society hall.

RB: And in those days it was just two of those societies.

MWH: That's right.

RB: Which grew to four later on, they were called literary societies.

MWH: Yes.

RB: Well, did any considerable number of parents show any reluctance to send their students back after that suspension for fear that, you know, after all, their daughters had only just barely escaped with their lives!

MWH: I don't have—I can only speak for myself.

RB: To the best of your knowledge, most of those students came back.

MWH: Yes, we came back. I don't remember the girls that did not come back, there were some, I'm sure. But I don't remember.

RB: I don't remember, do you, whether there has ever again been a serious fire on the campus?

MWH: Oh, I don't think so.

RB: I think that's the only—

MWH: I don't remember any before or since.

RB: We had a good one, when we had one. [chuckles] But that was it.

MWH: But that really destroyed our building.

RB: It was—it was really half the campus construction as it was originally—as the campus was originally built.

MWH: That's right.

RB: After the creation of the college by the state legislature. Okay. In the old Brick [Dormitory] building, the one that was destroyed, where you lived for some three years, were the conditions of living reasonably comfortable? For instance, did you have bathing facilities?

MWH: Oh, it was almost like a palace to me. Because I'd never been accustomed to even a big bathtub.

RB: There were bathtubs?

MWH: Oh yes, there were bathtubs.

RB: No showers?

MWH: No, I don't remember any showers.

RB: That's probably a modern affectation.

MWH: They were all just in one section, and we had to—wherever you were on that floor, you had to go to that particular place.

RB: And there was a long row of bathrooms?

MWH: Yes, they had four or five great big bathtubs. That's right.

RB: You keep saying "great big." They struck you as enormous Roman baths.

MWH: And in the front of the building—

RB: Hot water?

MWH: Was the office of Miss Sue May Kirkland? Who was our lady principal.

RB: Lady principal. What did that involve?

MWH: That we got all of our orders from?

RB: She was, I suppose, what would now be called the dean of women, but with probably more extensive functions.

MWH: Yes, yes.

RB: Getting back to those bathtubs, I'll get off that subject in a moment, was there running hot water?

MWH: Yes.

RB: Or—you didn't have to carry the water?

MWH: Oh, no, no.

RB: Good. Now, in that same building, the dining hall where resident students ate was also located, right? There was a dining hall in the old Brick Dormitory?

MWH: Yes, yes. We ate in the building. I've forgotten about that—the big dining room that I remember mostly was the one in Spencer [Dormitory] when we came back from suspension.

RB: In Spencer, which—that's where most of you moved after that year had ended?

MWH: Yes, when we came back in the fall.

RB: The next year, I see.

MWH: That was my last year.

RB: That was your last year, from '04 to '05.

MWH: So I have to initiate the old Spencer building.

RB: And the dining was not cafeteria style?

MWH: No.

RB: Was it, it was family style, individual tables, each with about eight students or so?

MWH: I've forgotten just how many.

RB: And you had assigned—

MWH: But we had our regular seats. Yes.

RB: Any special guests at the tables?

MWH: Wait—

RB: Do you recall—

MWH: Any guests that came to the college ate in that Spencer building, I know that. The teachers ate there.

RB: But was it not the custom at each of the tables in the dining hall to have one faculty member to the extent that there were enough of them to go around?

MWH: I'm not sure about that. I know that Miss Kirkland was always there.

RB: I get the feeling that she was a very central presence.

MWH: Yes. We all respected her. She was very firm-looking.

RB: Every time I talk to your generation of students, they always bring up Miss Kirkland.

MWH: Oh yes. We got all of our permission from her. To do anything. Outside of our schoolwork.

RB: Her yea was yea and her nay was nay, I suppose.

MWH: Yes, that's right.

[End of Interview]