

Oral History Interview
Interview with Jean Lawson Stelsel, class of 1944
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
Location: Lawrence University Archives
June 30, 2009
Transcription completed December 2009
Jean's husband sat next to her during the interview.

[Start: 00:00:00]

1. Could you please state your name?

My name is Jean Lawson Stelsel.

2. And what year did you graduate from Lawrence?

I graduated in February of 1944.

3. And what did you get your degree in?

Just a general degree, just B.A.

4. And why did you choose to attend Lawrence?

Well, my freshman year my dad couldn't afford to send me away to school, so we lived in Shorewood, in Whitefish Bay, and so I went to what was the old State Teachers College. My best friend was here at Lawrence, and she invited me up for several weekends and I went to some of the dances and things like that. And then when my dad said the next year, "You can go away wherever you want," I said, "I'm going to Lawrence," because I loved it up here.

5. And what were your first impressions of the campus and of Appleton?

Well, having been here and gone to some of the dances and everything, I knew the campus fairly well. Btu moving into a house like Lawe House with only thirteen girls and a housemother was a little bit different than I expected. I had expected to go into a dormitory. So that was the most fun ever, because we had one phone in the upstairs hall, and of course when anybody got a call, you shrieked all over the house to try and get somebody to come to the phone. And my roommate and I, Doris Angermeyer, and she's still living, she was two years ahead of me and she still writes to me every Christmas, she's in a home down in Whitewater, assisted living. And we had two rooms, we had the room off the living room and a room behind that which had beds in it. So we were really living in the lap of luxury, we were right off the living room. Then all the other girls lived upstairs. And I still keep in touch with one of them that only stayed for two years, but she would be interesting to talk to, it's Helen Schreiber Allen, and she lives in Fish Creek during

the summer and does tours, still at her age, of Fish Creek, because she's lived there all her life. The other girls, wherever they are, I don't know.

6. Where was Lawe House located on campus?

Lawe House was right at College Avenue and Lawe Street.

7. So where Plantz Hall is today?

Yes, right. And the union was right next to it, it was another small house, and we had just the first floor of that house for our union.

People have talked about going to Hamar Union to play bridge or to get grilled cheese sandwiches...

That wasn't even here when we were here. Was that what it was called, the little Union? The little house with the one little window where you ordered your stuff. We didn't play bridge there. I played bridge in the fraternity house and over at my own house, and very seldom ever over there. But you saved your money up that you got as an allowance, so you could go to the Union and have a doughnut and a hot chocolate or something, that was special.

8. What were the rules like for the women and then the men, I'm sure there were different rules for curfews.

We had ten o'clocks in sophomore year, we had eleven o'clocks our junior year, and twelve o'clocks our senior year. Every night was a twelve o'clock night, so it was very, very different because it's mostly coed now, and I've even heard of the fellows and the girls living together in the same room, so it's a long way from where we were. It was a beautiful campus and a beautiful time, I think one of the loveliest times in my life, really. We came by, Dave and I used to walk down river to the cemetery, that Catholic cemetery up there, and that was just beautiful, just beautiful. Then if you stopped on the way back, you stopped at the boat house, right? I'd never seen what a boilermaker was before, and a man next to me had a boilermaker, and I'd never seen a raw egg, terrible, terrible.

[00:04:48]

9. What were some of the activities that you were involved in while you were here?

I was in concert choir under Dean Waterman, and I also was active in the theatre. I had one lead in one play, and my claim to fame is the funny thing was, the girl that was playing the lead in this play was from my high school, and I knew her quite well, she got sick just before the play was to open. So Ted Cloak came over to my dorm room, and I was living in the Sig Ep house at the time, that was during the war years when we had girls over there. And he came in and he said, "You're going on tomorrow night." I had been holding book on that play, and so I knew the

words, so I got one of the girls in the house to come up and cue me on lines, we had a dress rehearsal that night, and I went on the next night as the lead. So that was fun, that was fun. My best time of all, I mean choir and when Ted had his place on the third floor of Main Hall.

10. On the third floor of Main Hall?

On the third floor of Main Hall there was a little stage in a big room, and he had a little office there. And then the only other classroom up there was a Speech classroom. So we used to go up there and practice up there, and then go over and work in the chapel.

11. Do you remember the name of the play that you were in?

The play that I took over on the opening night was "Letters to Lucerne" and the one that I had the lead in was "Having a Wonderful Time." That was when the Navy V-12 was on camps, and the lead opposite of me was a boy from the V-12. We had to do things, and "Heart of the City" was the first one I was in, and we played chorus girls, and four of us had to do the chorus line in front of the curtain before the play started. And if you've ever tried to balance yourself on someone's shoulder and kick, it is an experience. Those were the good times. And I met him (husband) through an oral interpretative class that he took because he thought it was going to be a snap, and I took because I was interested in it. He's just sitting there, he used to fall asleep in class. You did.

12. Do you remember who taught the class?

Ted Cloak. Oh, my idol is Ted Cloak. Ted could do no wrong. He even visited us at our home after we were out and married, and he claimed that he brought us together. And we knew his son, and then he and his first wife parted when we were here in school. But we had met his son quite often, and I think his son was on his honeymoon when he stopped at our house. But Ted had a way of inspiring you to do far beyond what you thought you could do.

13. Now did you come to Lawrence knowing you wanted to be involved in theatre?

I had been involved in dramatics at Shorewood High School, and so it was a logical thing for me to do. But I didn't try out for choir, the first year I thought, "Well, I can't sing well enough." Then I thought my junior year, I'll try out for the *Messiah*. I went and tried out for the *Messiah*, and then the dean would come down and while you were rehearsing, he'd stick his head down in front of you to listen to your voice. Then when he was done, he printed his own list of who was to make concert choir. So I made concert choir junior and senior year. And we did performances at the Golden Theatre in Chicago and then at the Riverside in Milwaukee. Plus doing the *Messiah* every year.

14. And when you did the *Messiah* in the Chapel, was it a sold out performance?

It was just wonderful. One evening when we were doing the *Messiah*, I got sick and I cried all the way back to my dorm because I had to leave at the half and not sing. But I can still hear the Hallelujah chorus and the fact that you didn't want to miss that one skipped beat at the very end of the Hallelujah chorus. I put down a few things that we had. Let's see I lived in Lawe House, my roommate was from Green Bay and she died of Alzheimer's, senior year in the Sig Ep house. My housemother in the Sig Ep house was Charlotte Wollaeger, who was Dean of Women here. She was also my English teacher in high school, and I had a crush on her brother. When you're a freshman you always had a crush on a senior, and I thought he was something. And let's see, Judge Waterman was famous for singing "Every Day is Ladies Day for Me." When you went on tour, he would stand up and sing "Every Day is Ladies Day for Me." And of course I graduated in February, we went through the summer for school. And I did put down, "Letters to Lucerne," prominent in my class, Dayton Grafman who just died within the last few years, he lived out in Arizona and was a concert pianist, just wonderful.

[00:10:32]

15. And they were Lawrence students?

They were Lawrence students, and Marguerite Schumann, you must have known of Schuie, and Shirlee Emmons went on to become quite famous for her singing. She was in the choir with us, but she went on to New York and did a lot of vocal teaching and things like that.

16. And Marguerite Schumann was in your class?

Marguerite was in our class and she was one of the Best Loved our senior year. And I saw Schuie quite often after that. If you went up to Door County, she was so active with Peninsula Players. And so we'd go up there. And then the Snow Queen Court, Jane Fletcher Hanson still lives in Neenah and she was the queen, and then there were six other girls chosen to be on Snow Queen Court. And my best friend who was here was on and I was, and you all had to wear white formals for that evening.

17. When did Snow Queen take place?

This was during about December, and then you had it in the little gym that was on campus. And you came walking in, and they were playing something about "you are so beautiful" and you'd come walking in. And Jane is still in Neenah, and not many people are around. Another person who was quite, Marti Bryant, I don't know if you've heard of Marti Bryant. Well, she was very active in the theatre, and she did a lot after that. And then we did a nurse recruiting skit during the war, four of us got together and did this, and we went around to different grade schools in Appleton, the high schools, and put on this little skit, hoping to get more people to join the war effort. My inspirational teachers, well, Ted Cloak of course, Dr. Kepler.

18. And what did Dr. Kepler teach?

Religion. Mr. Trever was Shakespeare, and Miss Jones taught French. She was delightful. And then just things like, we look up and down the main drag, the Treasure Box, Pettibone's, the sub station where you'd take your laundry every week.

19. Was this downtown Appleton?

Yes, you'd put your laundry into one of these box things you know, and you'd have a reverse card for sending it to your home. And it would come back to you, hoping that your mother baked cookies. Because when you took your laundry back, you always had that to look forward to. And that was down there in the Villa, it used to be there.

20. And where was the Villa?

The Villa had ice cream and cokes and stuff like that. Of course he knows more about the taverns than I. We couldn't drink when we were here, you weren't allowed to drink. And if you went in to Sage Hall, you got your breath checked when you went in.

21. And Sage was an all-women's dorm at the time?

Sage was an all-women's, they've changed Sage, I've been in there, but the funny thing was, we came back for a class reunion and my friend's freshman dorm room was at the end of the first floor in Ormsby. And when we came up and were assigned a room for the reunion weekend, it was the same room, right there. But Ormsby was a beautiful dorm at the time, now it's kind of a little bit on the rusty side.

22. Well, I was going to ask, since this was before we had Downer Commons as the dining hall, where did you have your meals at, was it in the house where you lived?

We had our meals in Sage in the basement, there was a big dining room on the back and then of course the girls from the school were waitresses. And you learned to eat things you never ate at home because if you ate fast enough, you got to the dessert first and you might be lucky to get two desserts. If you got pinned, they sang to you down there. Now he (husband) lived in Brokaw his freshman year and then of course when he went into the Sig Ep house, they had their own dining facility down there. We had good food, we had really good food. Mrs. Rodabush was the cook in the Sig Ep house. Then we had a housemother there, I corresponded with for many years after I got out of school. And it was a good time, it was a good time.

23. Now did all the women go and live in the fraternity houses during the war to make room in Brokaw?

Yes, yes they had all of the V-12 over in Brokaw. That was a big weekend, four of us from here decided we wanted to go down and see our boyfriends at Oberlin.

[00:15:28]

That's a drive.

We were going by train. So we went to Oshkosh, so they put us on a train on a siding. And then in the middle of the night, they came along and picked us up and took us to Chicago and we went on down to Oberlin. That was Janet Jones, Gail Outland, and I can't remember who the other one was. But I think they all married the boys that we went down to see. That was quite unusual. I'm sorry that when you get to be this age you don't have reunions anymore, and if you do, not many people come. A dear friend of ours, he was a year ahead of us and he was a Sig Ep, came to the class reunion last year and he was the only one from his class. He sent us a picture, here's John standing there with the year he graduated.

24. In addition to being involved in theatre and choir, where there any other groups on campus or activities that you were involved in?

Well, you were always active with your sorority. If you were doing something with them. I'm trying to think of anything else. I had a class from a Mr. Voss at one time where we built some of the scenery for a play. It was what they called Smith House over there. We did a whole, in the play there had to be a rock scene, and we did it all in paper maché, layers of wet paper and glue. I did a lot of bridge playing, dated a lot, dated in his (husband) fraternity for quite a while, started going with a boy from a Delt fraternity when I was in Milwaukee and then that went by the boards, but I came up here anyway. I guess I was known as having dated almost every boy in his fraternity at some time or other, even the boys that didn't date. One boy just never went out with anybody, and he took me to the movie and I think he was as scared as I was of going with him.

We didn't have the proliferation that you have of different cultures. In fact, I think our student body was about 750 at that time. So you knew everyone, and they knew you. And now, Dave and I have often talked about it, we'd never make it through Lawrence now, never. I mean, I read the *Lawrentian* and all that, I don't believe it, all the intense things. Freshman Studies would get you, would get you. I mean, Philosophy almost got me with Plato.

25. I was going to ask about some of the buildings that were on campus when you were here that are no longer here. Like the first Alexander Gymnasium, did you have gym classes in there?

No, you went to the little gym.

I mean, that's the first Alexander Gym.

That was your gym. Yes, you had your gym classes in there and you took your finals in there. We had a sorority dance at the Masonic Temple, went out to Riverview, is there a golf course?

Riverview County Club?

Yes, see when he (husband) was here, he fell over the top of a fence. And he decided a little while later that he couldn't raise his arm. So when we went to a dance, and I was of course in my formal and he was in his formal, but he got a luggage strap to put around his neck so he could put his arm in there. I won't say anything more than that. But then you would have, some of the faculty would be at your dances. And I can remember Ted Cloak was at that dance. There were just, I mean they had ice sculpture.

[00:20:24]

26. When was that, was that during the winter, like a Winter Carnival?

On the grounds of Main Hall there would be ice sculptures. And of course we always had a Homecoming parade.

27. And did your sorority ever put together a float for that parade?

I think so, but I can't remember what it would have been. It was a funny thing. I pledged Alpha Chi, and I lived in Lawe House, and I thought the girls there were very snobbish, very, very snobbish. Until I found out that almost all of them were Pi Phis. And they were not allowed to dirty Rush. And if they had been talking to me or being seen with me a lot, it would have been considered dirty Rush at that time. And I actually thought of de-pledging Alpha Chi and going Pi Phi. But the girls that I had pledged for were so nice. One of the gals from the Zuelke building was our more or less in control of our chapter here in Appleton. So I never did that, I stayed an Alpha Chi. But as you can see, I've got my little Sig Ep pin here. Your (husband) pin is on my charm bracelet.

28. I was also going to ask if you ever went into Underwood Observatory, because that was a building that used to be here?

No we didn't go into it, but it was well known as a good place to neck on a night, because the porch was more or less dark and recessed. Well, my best friend eventually married a fraternity brother of his, so we were close for years and years. Dorothy died about three years ago. We still see her husband, but infrequently, but we still do see him. But she was my main reason for coming here. But once I came, it was just, I didn't want to go home. And then one night when I came back my junior year, we came back on a train out of the Milwaukee station, that Northwestern station they tore down that they never should have. And Maggie Rogers came running on the train to get me and she said that he (husband) and his roommate wanted to take us out that night. So we went out to what is George's out here, I think it's still there. And not knowing, he was asking if I'd take his fraternity pin in the front seat and Bob was asking Maggie if she'd take his fraternity pin in the backseat. So when we went in, I was bubbling over and so was she. That didn't turn out well for her. We've been married for 64 years, there were a few good years and then he'll number which year it was.

29. When you were involved with the choir, did the choir meet in Peabody Hall?

In the Conservatory, yes. That's the Con was all it was called then.

30. What do you remember about that building, since it's no longer here?

I never went in the practice rooms, so I wouldn't know anything but the main little auditorium that we sat in. Who was our Chemistry teacher? Dr. Griffith was once said to have crawled into the class, oh that was psych. He crawled in on his hands and knees once just to see the reaction. He was a little strange, little strange. And Mr. Trever, my Shakespeare teacher, we were always called "Miss Lawson," "Mr. Stessel," and he said, "Miss Lawson, would you stay after class?" And I never was one to volunteer in class. I was the shy type. And he looked at me and said, "I know you know the answers. And I am going to call on you every class from now on." I loved Shakespeare though. I admired him. But he knew darn well that I, I never could, until I married him, he's so extraverted that he brought me out, and I hope I calmed him down. He's always lived in Waupun from the day he was born, and I came from New Jersey.

[00:26:04]

We bought a house last year in Florida. We decided that it was time, we've been in our motor home going to Florida, California, Arizona, for years and years and years. And our kids were beginning to think it's time for Mom and Dad to settle down somewhere. And we had no idea of buying this house until we walked in and saw that there was a lake right down. Then we bought it and then we went back and looked at each other and said, "What have we done?" I think it's true of most of the people that their years at Lawrence were wonderful years. That's about all I know.

31. Can you think of anything else?

Dayton Grafman used to come in to our Sig Ep house when we lived there. I lived in his room and Dayton would come in in the evening and play the piano for us. You just said play this, and he'd play it.

32. And men were allowed in the houses where the women lived?

They were allowed on the ground floor. When Mrs. Elliott was there and I was dating him (husband), he went down one stairway and then there was the big, long rec room down there. And then you went up the other way. So we'd all be down in there, and the lights would be off. And Mrs. Elliott would open the door on one end flick on all the lights and walk across the room and walk out and we'd all go and flick them all off again. But we, you weren't supposed to go into one of the bedrooms on the main floor. But I can remember playing battleships in John's room. The bridge room was on the first floor. We used to have many good bridge games in there. Our time is up.

I'll go ahead and turn this off then.

[End: 00:28:01]