

Oral History Interviews with Emeriti Faculty and Retired Staff
Interview with Mary Heinecke Poulson
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
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When did you teach at Milwaukee-Downer and at Lawrence?

I was at Milwaukee-Downer for a month, when I learned that the merger was occurring. And that was quite a shock; I expected to stay there a while. So, I was at Downer for a year, it was a wonderful year and then I came to Lawrence in 1964, expecting to look around and see what was available. Then I stayed for 29 years. So, obviously I loved it.

What subjects did you teach at Milwaukee- Downer and then at Lawrence?

Basically, the same, except Milwaukee-Downer had more class room courses for physical education, health and fitness, diet and nutrition and that sort of thing. At Lawrence, I basically taught regular physical education classes and then later in the 1970s I began coaching fencing and tennis.

Before you arrived at Milwaukee-Downer, where did you grow up?

I grew up in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and went to high school there. I did my undergraduate work at Valparaiso University and my graduate work at the University of Miami of Ohio. Then I did a lot of courses at Boulder, Colorado, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin....all over the place.

What made you decide to go into the field that you went into, to teach and do physical education?

Well, I'm not so sure. Throughout my life I haven't really made too many decisions. Things seem, opportunities seem to pop up and they sound appealing and I would take advantage of them. I always enjoyed English which was my major and I enjoyed working with young people, so it seemed a good fit. Then after teaching for about six years I wasn't sure that that's what I wanted to do, so a friend of mine and I bummed for a year. Just drove around the country picking up odd jobs here and there. Then I came back, worked with the Girl Scouts as a professional worker and then went to graduate school, then was hired at Milwaukee-Downer.

Back when you were in college and graduate school, how do you feel that experience was different from what college students of today go through when they're getting their degree? Or is there any difference?

Oh, I suppose, basically there isn't, but I think students nowadays have many, many more pressures, many more issues to deal with than we had. I went to college just after World War II and everybody was glad the war was over and there wasn't as serious an element in our education I think as there is nowadays. Not that we treated it lightly but it was just, people were so relieved and the veterans were coming back and so they had a big effect on traditions, like hazing. You know, that was not something that was in their experience.

What made you decide to go to Milwaukee-Downer?

Well, I worked with the Girl Scouts and I went through...there was an opportunity through the University of Miami of Ohio's career center. There was an opening and I thought it sounded interesting. I had taught some Physical Education at a high school level and so I applied and I was hired.

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What were your first impressions of Milwaukee-Downer?

My mother had gone to a girls' school, so I had a lot of preconceptions of what a girls' school was like. It was a wonderful experience. There were lots of traditions. The faculty and the students were, as they are at Lawrence, very engaged with one another. There were quaint old traditions and a real genuine love for Milwaukee-Downer.

Were you involved in some of the activities that went on? You were there a year before coming here, but did they do things like the Hat Hunt or the Crew Races?

Yes, the Hat Hunt and the Crew Races and then I started a fencing program, which was kind of strange because I started it and they agreed to it knowing that the school was going to be merging. And then we had a wonderful faculty production at the end of the year to the tune of "Camelot." And it was of course the story of the merger. And it was great fun; it brought the students and the faculty together. It was great.

Was the news that Milwaukee-Downer was going to merge with Lawrence, was that a surprise? How did everyone learn of that?

Oh yes, it was an absolute shock. For me, it was a surprise, but so many people who had been there for so many years were totally shocked. For me, the change I think was a little easier because I had been there such a short time. But for many people, this was a very difficult move. I was very fortunate when I came to Lawrence that Ruth Batemen, who was in the Physical Education Department at that time, just took me under her wing. For me the transition was very easy and I became very involved in Lawrence. But, I know for many of the entrenched faculty from Downer, it was a very difficult time.

In your time at Milwaukee-Downer, what was the women's athletics program like?

Well, at that time, women's athletics was not thought of as it is today. You didn't talk about teams and competitions; you talked about play days and things that were not too exerting. I think probably the women at Milwaukee-Downer were used to more of that competitive kind of activity than they were at many other schools. There was the crew and we had some tennis and some fencing. And we had an organization and we would have little competitions among dorms.

How was it beginning the fencing program at Milwaukee-Downer? Were students very excited about doing this new type of sport or was there any hesitation to doing that?

Oh, I don't think so. The president just asked if there was anything that I would like to do in particular. I said that I was particularly interested in fencing. He was very accommodating and bought the equipment and so we had some fun classes.

Were there any professors at Milwaukee Downer that you worked with that really had a very strong influence on you, someone that you really bonded with that last year that Milwaukee Downer was in existence?

I think Marjory Irvin was the person with whom I became acquainted first and she has remained a good friend throughout our Lawrence years. Now she's retired in Kentucky, but we see each other a couple times a year. There are many others, the Purdos, the Tanks....I'm sure there are others that I'm forgetting to mention, but, oh, the Thralls. It was a very congenial group.

With coming to Lawrence, when was the first time you came and visited the university and what were your first impressions of it?

I came just for a day and I met with Ruth Batemen and I think she was the only one I met with. She was very hospitable. So, my impressions were positive.

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Your first years at Lawrence, how was the athletics program here different from how it was at Milwaukee-Downer since this was a co-ed institution?

I don't know if it was really too much different. There was the intramural aspect, which we also had at Downer. At that time, of course, woman's athletics was downplayed and I started a women's tennis team, but we didn't call it a tennis team. We had competitions with other schools throughout the state but we didn't call it a tournament. So, there were all sorts of euphemisms for woman's athletics.

Why was it not called a team?

Because at that time intercollegiate athletics for women was not done. When I was in college we would have play days with other schools and then we would mix our teams.

We wouldn't play against them. We would have some of their people on our team and some of our team members on their team. So, it was all sort of a façade for keeping us oppressed (laughing).

You played a very significant role in building women's athletics here at Lawrence. What were some of the challenges with that and what was the reaction of the faculty and students to doing that?

The reaction of the students was very positive. They were eager. The reaction of the faculty, I think as a whole, was very positive. It was very difficult to convince members of the athletic department who were not used to thinking about sharing the facilities, sharing the time, sharing the money with women. We started an organization called WISAL, Women in Support of Athletics at Lawrence, and that is when women's athletics really began to build. Eventually, I think, the male members of the department, some of them, just accepted the fact that this is the way it's going to be. And then the Athletic Director, Ron Roberts at that time, started a conference for women within the state. Then gradually we became a part of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest Conference. But there were a lot of things that had to be ironed out. For many years, it was a constant effort to educate people to the need for women and athletics as well as men. I think philosophically they probably agreed, but practically it was an interesting time.

Where were the women's athletics? Were they done in Alexander Gym as well?

Yes. We had to arrange scheduled things.

What were some of the types of sports that you began with, with you doing women's athletics? Did it begin with tennis and fencing?

Well, we had classes. At that time physical education was required. I think there was a two year requirement. So we had a variety of sports. We had horseback riding, we didn't instruct that class ourselves but we made that available. We had archery, bowling, tennis and badminton, basketball, volleyball, you know, whatever. We offered a class. And there were of course a number of students who were required to take the class and we had quite a few classes.

How did women's athletics change at Lawrence from the time you arrived in 1964 to when you retired in 1993?

Well, when I came, there really was no such thing as women's athletics. There was a women's recreation association and we used to get together with women's field hockey teams with Oshkosh. So, there was some interchange. But as far as conference and competitions and a schedule and a budget, I remember the first time our women's tennis team, which was the first sport here at Lawrence that was made a varsity sport, and when we went over to Ripon to play. On our way back we stopped at a fast food place and they all got out their wallets, their purses. I said this comes out of the budget. They were so shocked (laughing). That was such a new experience for them. And, of course, they

began to get used to it. It was really kind of a joy to see how excited they were to have a meal paid for them because they had been a part of a team at Lawrence.

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What was the relationship like between the faculty and students and administration at Lawrence? At Milwaukee-Downer, you talked about how close everyone was and how much they were a part of each other's lives. How was that at Lawrence?

I think it probably was pretty nearly the same. I think the administrations has always been supportive of athletics, and during Rik Warch's tenure here, he was very supportive of anything that the faculty did that he felt was helping the mission of the school. So, I think, the coaches, I think we had a special kind of relationship because we went on trips and we were with our students constantly and in a different setting than a classroom. So, I really treasure all those experiences and I treasure some of the students with whom I keep in touch now. So, I think that is a wonderful aspect of athletics, that relationship. You can get a lot of point across more easily in an athletic situation I think.

What were some of the other professors or students that really influenced your life and that you've maintained contact with?

I'm not sure I understand...you mean...

I'm sorry, other Lawrence faculty and students. Because we had talked about the Milwaukee- Downer faculty.

Oh, do you want names?

You can do names, or you can be general.

Well, I found the faculty, for the most part, were very supportive and the students were interested in team aspects. And, I don't know as I can say anything else. I think Rik Warch had a big influence on our programs and certainly on me. And there have been a number of members of the faculty of whom I very fond and got to know and respect.

Were there any particular activities or traditions that you observed or were a part of while you were here at Lawrence, like for example, how was it here during the 1960s, and were there any particular types of national events that students and faculty really reacted to...things like that?

Well, the 1960s were interesting years, and I'm sure you'll here this from a lot of the older faculty. I remember some things like the sit-in in the administration building when they were lobbying for hours to be eliminated and different dorm situations to be tried. I remember Affirmative Action Committee was quite active at that time; I was a member of that. Women's athletics of course at that time were just beginning, so that was a big part of that era. It was a difficult era. I remember when the Kent State event took place,

that I was not coaching the men's team at that time but when that happened, I don't think our men went to the conference. Students were involved in national issues and there were a lot of people lobbying for all sorts of changes as I think was true in most schools. Of course, I was mostly involved with the athletic part of it and I was happy to see this almost exploding.

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What were some places that you traveled to or activities that you did during your time off from Lawrence or if you took a sabbatical or for the summer?

During the summer I was sort of on busy holiday. I usually worked at the Bachmenline tennis camp and they were stationed here for about twenty years and so I spent a good bit of my summer doing that. And my husband and I did a lot of tent camping. My sabbaticals, I had two of them, I spent in California and I did a lot of visiting. I visited a lot of the universities there and talked to the coaches and observed their programs. One year we went to Europe and I had an opportunity to see some of Fencing Salz River in Europe. It is such a big tradition over there that it's wonderful to see the traditions they have in their buildings and their attitudes, very old world.

What are some of the activities or places that you have traveled to since you have retired from Lawrence?

I loved all my years at Lawrence, but I must say retirement has been great (laughing). I've done a lot of traveling. I've traveled primarily with a friend of mine with whom I traveled well, we liked to do the same things and at our ages there aren't too many people who like to take off. So, I've been over a good bit of the United States and I've been in Central and South America, Peru, Chile, Brazil...not Brazil, Argentina, and in Europe, Denmark, Malta – at Professor Chaney's suggestion – Turkey and Italy. So, I've had a wonderful time and I wish I would have done this many years ago, because it's very enlightening. And, other activities I'm involved in now, I coordinate a CROP walk which is to help the poor and needy and that is held once a year. I coordinate a group called the Noon Hour Philosophers; we have a speaker every week during the year. I belong to a bridge club, I travel, and I'm active at church...so life is good.

What was your favorite place that you traveled to? Or favorite places?

I love England, all aspects of it. But, we had a trip to Turkey that was really a wonderfully enlightening trip. I don't know if I can pick out a favorite. Every time I travel, that becomes my favorite place for a while, until I go somewhere else.

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the Emeriti Group that meets once a month in the Grill. Can you talk about that?

I was going to mention that I think probably Lawrence is unique in its activity among the emeriti, not totally unique but, I think....When we first had the opportunity to go to

Bjorklunden as a group for about a week in the fall we met and we decided that we would see what other schools were doing with or for their Emeriti. We found out that there is really very little activity any where. They might get together for a dinner every month or something. We do have our monthly coffee and we are just there for an hour. The Union is so noisy when we're there, I'm sure, when we leave, it's a real relief. It's been good of the administration to give us that, the opportunity especially to go up to Bjorklunden where we pay a minimum amount to be there and we have a wonderful time, it's sort of like a seminar, but we have free time and we have our happy hour get together in the evening. I think it has created a bond among the Emeriti. I think we are concerned about one another and I think we have all gotten to know one another in a little different way than we had when we were all on the active faculty. That's a wonderful relationship and as I say, we appreciated the administration support.

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I did want to mention one other thing. We've had Scarff professors in the past here. And I think that's one of the finest programs that we have. I think probably the most influential person who, during my experience at least, who came was William Sloane Coffin who made an amazing impact on, not only Lawrence, but also on the community. And I think that sort of program I hope continues because I think it's important for students to have the opportunity to get to know someone who has made a...who has been very influential in the history of the United States and is respected throughout the world. And I hope that program continues.

I was also going to ask...You were one of the charter members of the Intercollegiate Hall of Fame in 1996, I believe, and from what I read you were the first woman to be on the Hall of Fame and I was wondering if you could tell me about that experience, what it was like to be a charter member?

I was a wonderful honor. I suppose you could look at it from a different standpoint, I think I was the first woman who was involved in intercollegiate athletics so, I suppose I was a logical choice because I had been here for so long. But, never the less, it was an honor and I treasure the fact that I am a member of the Hall of Fame.

Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

I do want to mention that when I came from Downer, I was really kind of excess baggage in the physical education department because they had two women and a group of men. So, I think one of the highlights of being at Lawrence was that fact that I could make my own position really. And so then I was able to really get into fencing and I was able also then to coach when I was asked to coach both the men's and the women's teams. That was an interesting experience for me because that happened during the late 1960s and at that time women coaching men teams was not a common thing. So, such experiences have made my experience at Lawrence a very special one. I haven't loved every minute (laughing) but I have loved the entire experience tremendously.

Is there anything else?

I can't think of anything

I think we covered a great deal.

Yes, we certainly did. I think that's about it.

[End: 00:30:02]