

**Oral History Interviews, Reunion Weekend 2008**

**Interview with Virginia Robie Cassin, class of 1945**

**Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow**

**John G. Strange Commons, Main Hall**

**Interview #4 for June 21, 2008**

[Start 00:00:00]

**1. Could you please state your name?**

I'm Virginia Cassin, and I was Virginia Robie when I was in school here.

**2. And what year did you graduate from Lawrence?**

In 1945.

**3. And what did you get your degree in?**

Psychology.

**4. And why did you choose to attend Lawrence?**

I lived within a nice distance from Oak Park, Illinois, which was my home, and my father always said, "Go far enough where it's not easy to come home, but be close enough if you need to come home," and this was just a good distance. And wonderful school, good reputation, nice size, I went to a high school of 4500 and was determined to find a nice little school which was comfortable with smaller numbers.

**5. And what were your first impressions of Lawrence when you got here?**

I liked the older buildings, kind of liked that all of my life. I loved the trees. I can't recall if I came in the fall, I might have. The wonderful colored leaves in the fall. This building itself was inspiring. The nice old Ormsby Hall for Freshman, and then of course later I lived in the Fraternity Quadrangle, because all the men left for the war and all the girls moved out so that the Navy Unit could move into Ormsby and Brokaw.

**6. What was it like here on campus during the war?**

Well of course it was wonderful when we began, it was very normal, it was of course the fall of 1942. Everyone was of course concerned about the war. I came here and the young man that I was in love with was a high school sweetheart, was headed for Notre Dame. For me it was a little lonely because I really missed him, and I missed of course my family. It was great fun at Ormsby Hall, all kinds of wonderful little things now we remember about Ormsby Hall. I said to somebody today, "I wonder if in the winter the pipes still pound when they turn on the heat. There were some air pockets or something

in there." I lived at the far end of the second floor hall, so of course we looked right over Lawe Street right out there and the bridge. It was very welcoming, and I was so fond of my professors here. Mr. McConagha's economics classroom downstairs, he was a sweet dear man that made economics kind of interesting actually.

**7. In addition to him, who were some of your other favorite professors?**

Mr. Raney who taught English history, Joseph Griffiths who taught me Psychology, Miss Jones who taught French, I'm trying to think who else strikes me, but those were my favorites, they were my great favorites.

**8. Given that the men were away at the war and there were not very many of them on campus, did dances continue to be held?**

They wouldn't have been, except shortly after they all left, a big Navy unit arrived, and they were very handsome in their naval uniforms and sailor suits. They were charming and they just came in and found ladies for their social life and we all enjoyed them as well. It got quite normal then. We could have some of the same social events that we had had before. They were from all over the world, even more so than we, tend to be more local.

[00:04:45]

**9. What were some of the organizations that you were involved in while you were here at Lawrence?**

Well, I pledged Pi Phi, and one time was president of Pi Phi. There was a Lawrence Women's Association, and I was president of the Lawrence Women's Association. All of us of course were joined by sweethearts overseas during the war. Many of us were knitting and doing things like that for the men when they came back. I was part of Ted Cloak's group, who headed up all the Drama, and I was playing in his plays. I was a little redhead and he always put me in the part of the child, like you, you're short, too. And that was great fun. I was in art classes here, so I was doing a lot of things with the Art department as well.

I think probably living in the fraternity houses over there was a whole different experience because we had about 25 women. And they all slept on these kind of open porches. My roommate and I were in the president's room while we were here, which was kind of fancy because we had our bath right outside the door. There were a lot of things that were really different, you know, living in a dorm was different. We were looking the other night at some of the regulations, some of the special things, every Wednesday night was steak night, we had a night that we all dressed in long dresses, we had programs over in the chapel that we all attended dressed to the nines. On those days you dressed very elegantly when you did anything special.

During the time I was here Nathan Pusey came as the president. We were all kind of involved in making him welcome. There was a play on Broadway in those days that had to do with music about a president. So I recall we all had a parade, all the student body, and he lived in the president's house, which is no longer the president's home. We all marched around the house with banners, and we were all singing, "N M P for president, N M P for president," which was the music from the Broadway show. Then they had a very nice event to inaugurate him, and all of the presidents from various other colleges came.

And I was a sophomore and they asked me if I would give the welcoming address on behalf of the student body at this luncheon. I of course was totally unprepared for all these men and their beautiful robes. So I remember writing a speech about the heritage of presidents, because they had a wonderful exhibit in the library about various presidents. And it was just a little Carnegie library in those days, so I started my talk and said, "I've just been over looking at these wonderful pictures of all the presidents with their very distinguished beards and wonderful look," and that was kind of the introduction to the talk. I can tell you exactly what dress I had on, I can tell you I was wearing a hat, it was a very impressive time. And Nathan Pusey just took to me as his student person, and way after I was out of school we still wrote to each other, when he went on to Harvard. This has been a great memory.

[00:09:14]

**10. Well when you were in some of the plays, where did the rehearsals and the plays take place on campus?**

I think we were over in the Chapel. We didn't have your Performing Arts Center. We did have a wonderful little Victorian old house, Hamar Union, which was on the corner, and they had the best cocoa and the best grilled peanut butter sandwiches. And we used to go in there, and there were only three or four tables for us to sit. It was amazing because there were a thousand students even in those days. But it was just like home. You'd go over and sit there and people behind the little counter there were all so friendly and pleasant, a long, long way from there to what you have now and what you're going to have, but very friendly and warm. It was a wonderful campus, you knew everyone walking across campus.

There was a delightful young teacher, professor teaching Geology, Bill Read. And he taught me Geology, I loved it, it was a course I enjoyed all my life because of what I learned there. And he had two little children, I used to go over and baby-sit with his children. And apparently he was here quite a number of years, and people remembered him. And lots of teachers, professors I should call them, that were so kind and so personal. I remember coming to see if I would be in first or second year from my knowledge of French, and Anne Jones of course had her interview with all of us, and said, "You must have been taught by a Parisian French woman." I said, "No, I wasn't." She said, "Your accent is wonderful." So I went back and told her what a nice opportunity that was.

**11. Was Hamar Union also a place where students would go if they wanted to play cards or study?**

Yes, I think there were some rooms upstairs. We had the Panhellenic House, the sororities met and we each had a room. I'm trying to remember what street it was, it was probably Lawe Street. It ran this way of the college. Of course that meant you had a little storage cubbyhole to keep all your sorority things in, and that was where you squeezed all your members in. For pledge they put up sheets with little corridors you had to walk through and what have you. I just asked someone in our song, which is about, "send a raft down the Fox, burning bright," we used to do that every year. We'd light the big bonfire on the raft and send it off down the river. We always had a big parade, Homecoming parade, and I just remember being a can of Campbell's tomato soup one year in the parade.

After we moved over into the fraternity houses, you know, my husband now of course would come up to visit while he was still in training in the Army. He would stay in one of the houses on the other side from the Sig Ep house, we were in the Sig Ep house, and he was across the way. And we used to walk, they're talking now about the river walk, there used to be a little path that you walked, they called it "going down river." There was a cemetery down there, and it was where we all went to do a little smooching.

**At the cemetery?**

At the cemetery, it was kind of quiet, you could sit at the foot of a tree. If you said, "We're going down river," they knew what you meant, where you were headed. Except there was a screech owl down there that got very eerie, made spooky sounds if you were sitting late at night in the cemetery. When we were in the Sig Ep house, the woman who came to be kind of our house mother, was a woman by the name of Duffy, so all of us answered the phone over there, "Duffy's tavern" when people called. All of the sorority houses had nice parties and we went to hose. The men played on the green in the middle of the fraternity houses. It was very sociable, we all had a wonderful time. But we did graduate a year ahead, you see, because I would have been 1946, I started in 1942. But the navy unit went all year round, so we all went all year round, too.

**12. Did you have any kind of break?**

No, well, you had a few days, you would have between semesters. And most of our classes were in this building, except for Science class.

**13. Was that in Stephenson?**

No, we didn't have, the little gym was right next to the Science building, there's a little gymnasium there. You had to take a gym class for six weeks, you had to take a class until you could get a B. And I remember having tennis three times, because the tennis racket was always bigger than I was, so it was too heavy and too big. We used to have some parties over where I believe the Performing Arts Center is now. There used to be a church

right at that corner, and we would have dances there, everybody wore long dresses of course, and we were all wearing what we called stadium boots, those big, old klutzy boots with fleece on the inside, I remember all the time. Everywhere we went, we had those big old boots on.

And we had a wonderful football team, won every game, a great, great event. I remember walking across the river and over the bridge, I can't remember why we would have gone over there, the Men's gymnasium was across the river. We went to something over there, and there was always that yucky smell from the paper mills. But the campus is still beautiful just as it was, not too different from this vantage point. It's when you get over behind everything there, and it's wonderful what you're doing.

[00:17:28]

**14. I was going to ask if you ever got to go into the Observatory when it was here on campus?**

You know, I don't recall if I ever did. There were some classes there for people who were involved in that sort of thing.

**From the pictures it looks like it was such a beautiful building.**

I was telling my husband, we were sweethearts so I wasn't really that serious about what was going on here. But I dated a fellow who was very active in the Alumni group at one time, Louis Traas. He was kind of a clown of a fellow, everybody thought he was kind of a clown, and all my schoolmates thought I was much in love with Bill who was over in Europe in the war. And I came home and said, "Well, Louie Traas just asked me to wear his pin." So they all came over, his fraternity men, stood under the window, and serenaded me as if it was for real. And my friends over at Ormsby were just horrified, they just loved Bill, and said, "What are you doing with this clown of a guy?" Well, he's a wonderful fellow, he's just a character. So that was very much a part of it all, the fraternity men and their romantic things that they did.

**We're nearly out of time...**

I'm sure we are, and I've talked too much.

**15. Is there anything else you'd like to add or share?**

Yes, the Best Loved.

**Oh yes, tell me about the Best Loved!**

I was one of the Best Loved, there was four, we came in as a total surprise, everybody had voted, but nobody knew who it was. And we all came in dressed in our powdered hair tied back, and our colonial clothes, and one couple was the Jeffersons, another was

the Washingtons, and I can't remember, I don't think I was Jefferson, I think I was Washington. And I had my gentleman's outfit on, and we all came in the door, and everybody stood up and then we marched to the middle of the floor, there was always a very nice dinner, and there was music. We had practiced ahead to do the minuet. I don't know if they still do that.

**I don't think they do.**

It was really charming and lovely. And I was Mortar Board and Junior Spade, which was a nice, nice award, I was a Phi Beta Kappa here. The day I graduated I was first in my class, so I was *summa cum laude*. In those days, when you walked across and you were a *summa*, everyone stood, which was lovely. It was a wonderful experience. And the day that everyone cleaned out the house and left, I was virtually waiting for my family to come and pick me up. We had gone through some of us and collected all the stuffed animals that everybody had left. The man who had given the address at the graduation was the director of the Newberry Library in Chicago, and his name was Stanley Park Ellis. There was this wonderful big fat bear that somebody had left, and I lamented to my roommate at the time, "I feel like we are looting this place, but all these people have left things." So I said, "I'm going to take him home, and I'm going to name him Lottie Park Ellis."

After I was totally alone, I got a telegram and it said, "You have been selected for the award this year for Pi Beta Phi sorority." And it was the top award. Different provinces got awards and states got awards. And I here I was all by myself, standing there with nobody to hug, and nobody to scream or what you would do. Charlotte Wollaeger was here, she was Dean of Women, and she said, "I can't believe Ginny Cassin with all that she has to offer, and all she wants to do is to marry the guy who probably is going to come home now." And I remember she said, "Good for you." It was a wonderful, wonderful part of my life.

**End [00:22:46]**