

Oral History Interviews, Milwaukee-Downer Reunion Weekend 2006

Interview #3 with Betty Heistad Barrett, class of 1955

By Julia Stringfellow

Briggs Hall room 424

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Start [00:00:00]

1. Could you please state your name?

Betty Heistad Barrett.

2. What year did you graduate from Milwaukee-Downer?

1955.

3. And what was your degree in?

Occupational Therapy.

4. Why did you choose to attend Milwaukee-Downer?

I was quite interested in OT and my choices were really the University of Illinois and Milwaukee-Downer College, and I got a good scholarship from Downer and I also liked the small size and the ability to do so many other things. It was close, I grew up in Chicago.

5. What was the transition like going from high school to college?

I went to a real fine private high school, co-ed. Which of course was not the usual turn around, you usually went to a co-ed college. It was quite interesting, I think the most interesting thing for me was the age of the faculty, because there were a lot of these older women, wonderful, well-educated women whose lives were teaching. It's different, it was different from high school, we had good teachers, they were quite a variety of ages. And I think too probably quite different from the usual public university.

6. What were some of the traditions at Milwaukee-Downer that you participated in, like the Hat Hunt?

They were all there, there was so many of them. Hat Hunt of course was the big one that was quite distinctive and went on for such a long time. Cabaret was a lot of fun where the classes would compete against each other, write a script and perform and they were all original and kind of off the wall. All the Christmas festivities were fun, interesting. The Colors Day, there were a lot of things associated with being freshmen versus the sophomores. Freshmen and the juniors were sister classes and they were supportive.

There were just a lot of memorable things, the point of them, they all were cued to bring you together, to bring you as a cohesive group.

7. What exactly was Colors Day?

Colors Day was when the freshmen received their color. The other classes, there was kind of a parade around the campus, and each class held its color banner, a very large banner with the class number and years on it. They'd all wear their jackets, the Freshmen wore white and were given their banner that they carried for the four years. And it was a very nice tradition.

8. Now what were some of the activities that occurred around the holiday season and at the end of the school year?

The holidays, of course we had Lantern Night, and I know there's been a lot of talk about that. That was great fun, going out to various different places to sing Christmas carols, and it was a service project. There was the English Christmas play. I was a German student, and we did a German Christmas play, more singing Christmas carols in German. We all can still sing all the carols in German, I think! And that was very colorful and attractive. I lived in a dormitory, in Holton Hall, and one of the traditions was to have a Christmas dinner where everybody wore a formal. So there are pictures in your Archives of all of these young girls in their bright colored formals in that beautiful old parlor in front of the fireplace in Holton Hall. In one of the dormitory rooms up on the fourth floor, it was called Sky Parlor, and it was a cheaper alternative for those of us whose parents couldn't afford to pay the full rate, there were four of us. We would always have a little cocktail party before the Christmas party, and it was a tradition to spike the punch, which was really unheard of in the early 1950s. It had been going on for years! And I think you might pour a pint of vodka because it didn't smell into this fruit punch. That was really a funny thing. We came up with some little hors d'oeuvres, and everyone would come up to the fourth floor. That was fun.

At the end of the year, I remember in Hawthornden, it's very pretty, we had an event toward the end of the year, and Commencement. And there were always recitals at various times toward the end of the year.

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9. Were there activities that would bring men onto campus so you could interact with them?

Yes, we would have mixers, they were pretty awful. The girls lined up and the boys would come in, and they were mostly from Milwaukee School of Engineering and Marquette. But I remember the Milwaukee School of Mortuary Science or something like that, that was the name of it, and they were older, and they were pretty wild. It was interesting. The mixers were very often, we met and mingled with boys. Sometimes we

would have boys in plays, parts that could not be played by women, and that was interesting. They were very useful.

10. Were there any athletics that you were involved in at Milwaukee-Downer?

We were required to take a sport every semester, as I remember. And they had a wide variety of sports. We would have class teams, and playing against each other. Then they would have, you would get a numeral, which was your class number that you would sew on your jacket for the class team, then if you made the college team, it was kind of an all-star team, you would get an M-D to sew on your jacket. I remember taking archery, which was something brand new to me, without the fancy bow. And there was one girl, Barbara Moon, a year ahead of us, who was the real archer, and she chose not to take archery one year. So I went to the college archery championship, because there wasn't much competition. But we played tennis and hockey, and of course crew was really the most unusual sport there at any college, in particular a women's college. We feel we are responsible for Lawrence having crew, raised money for it, and the shells are all named in connection to Downer, the one that I know about, there may be some others now. That was really an event, everybody looked forward to the regatta. We only had two shells, we had two heats, one team against another. Then of course the cox got thrown in the river by the winning team, that was great fun.

11. And the regatta usually took place in Milwaukee?

In the spring. It was a little bit warmer, not very. But I think the requirement to participate in athletics of some kind was a great benefit to all of us. It was unusual at that time, particularly the high level of participation that was required. It was fun, it was exercise. I'm sure a lot of us have kept up with various sports because of that.

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12. Were there any professors in particular that made a difference in your life, that really influenced you?

Yes, there was this wide array of older women, nearly all of them single, because in those days very often you chose between marriage and a career. And these women had chosen careers. And there was Miss Heimbach, who lived in our dormitory, our physical education teacher, a very nice lady, Miss Rossberg. Another thing that was so interesting is that most of them had PhDs, but it was not the thing to call them doctor, they were "Miss" and not "Ms." And Miss Rossberg was a very obedient German teacher, soft-hearted. A lot of people liked Miss Calbick, the Spanish teacher. Marjory Irvin, who is here and comes back very often, was a quite young new piano teacher, music teacher, and I took piano the first semester I was there. She really is not very much older than we are, she may have been 25 or something like that when she started. And I remember her extremely well, she was a good influence. There were the OT professors, Mr. MacArthur, one of the few men, he taught speech, of course everybody loved Dr. Pete. I never had

him for class, but he was just a delightful man with a wonderful wife. They made a big difference in the example, the role models that we had were strong.

13. What was dorm life like since the professors lived in the dorms with the students? Were there a lot of rules for coming and going?

You probably have heard a lot about curfews. When we were freshmen, we had to be in at eight o'clock on weekdays, and I think it was either ten or eleven on weekends. When you were above your freshman year, you could come in at ten o'clock on weeknights. I was the dorm president at Holton my junior year, and my big campaign promise was to allow seniors to stay out until one o'clock on Saturday night. And we got that! It was a big deal. You had to sign in and out, and you met your date in the date parlors which were on the first floor of each dormitory. And I lived my freshman year right next door to the date parlor which was kind of interesting. With the dates you couldn't close the doors, you had to leave them open, that's as far as the boys could go. And the fathers too, they were kept out except for very special occasions. There were a lot of rules. Some of them helped you adjust to the greater freedom of being away from home.

14. What was the relationship like between the students and the faculty and the administration?

I think it was pretty close. The professors who lived in the dorm ate with us at night, and we had a rather formal set-up. Professors sat at the head of the table, the food was served family style, and you were expected to make conversation. It was a good learning experience. And there's always of course the conflict between teachers and students and the administration. But I think in general there was a very good feeling. My freshman year was Dr. Johnson's first year as president, the first year Miss Briggs was gone. And I think there were some adjustments in the way things happened because of the change. And I think there were some loosening of the old rules, because he was younger and different and he hadn't been there for umpteen years. He also was a man. That was one reason we are very happy about Dr. Beck being president here, return to a little bit to that tradition. Although Dr. Johnson was a real good man. Of course no one liked the dean very well. She was the enforcer.

15. Who was the dean?

What is her name, I can see her. She was a strict lady. There really wasn't anything wrong with her. It was just her job to be a policeman, policewoman.

16. Dr. Johnson was more of a kinder, gentler...?

Yes, he was a very nice man and very caring. I think he felt the load of being the man among females on campus.

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17. How do you feel that attending an all-women's college benefitted you while you were a student, and how did it continue to influence your life after you graduated?

I think because there were no boys around to take the lead which was very common in the 1950s, we had to rely on ourselves. If it was going to be done, we had to do it. We were all officers of something or other, leaders of something or other, particularly with the emphasis on these competitions. I think we learned more about leadership. And I went into various kinds of, I didn't work very long as an OT, but I was a volunteer and led some occupational therapy volunteers. Then I went into League of Women Voters which is another good way to learn leadership skills, and was elected to our Student Council for three terms, there weren't very many women who were elected. I was able to end at three terms which was fine. That was quite a different thing, and I don't know, I had to carry a lot of leadership so easily and successfully.

18. When there were vacations from school did you do any traveling, did you go abroad?

Oh no, we didn't go abroad. I was a scholarship student and my family didn't have money. My parents were social workers. But we did do some traveling. I remember junior year spring break, I went to Washington with my family. It was the time of the hearings, and you could attend one of those hearings, which was very interesting. One of the most memorable vacations was Thanksgiving of freshman year. I went home for the first time, I didn't go home every weekend. And I took my friend who was Hawaiian and couldn't go home with me. That was really fun, my whole family remembers that time very well.

19. What was it like to live in Milwaukee, to have the college there? What did the students generally do when they went out?

There was a couple of shopping centers right down the street from campus. Of course none of us had cars, and I know some of the city students had use of cars, but not very many of them. And the shopping areas, there was a small one close to school, a couple of blocks, and there was a larger one several blocks away. They called them, the small one was "lesser," and the bigger one was "greater." "Greater" one had a movie theater, so that was a frequent place. Most of us were not financially able to take advantage of a lot of things, it was really a disadvantage. Although we did go to the theaters sometime, occasionally when we had a date, we'd go to a restaurant. But a lot of the social life revolved around the school, because we were all right there and made our own company. Now I didn't, my husband had the bar, Elmer's Tavern, in "greater" where a group of us went after the faculty/student volleyball game. We were singing as Downer girls were known to do, somebody knew him and pointed him out and said to come sing with us. And I was elected to take a note up to him inviting him to sing. So I picked him up at the bar, 51 years ago. So that was a memorable, important time in our lives.

20. We're actually out of time. Is there anything else you would like to add or a story you would like to tell before we conclude the interview?

I wish I thought more about this before, but Downer was a wonderful experience and I feel I was quite privileged. We didn't have as many choices at that time, but the choice I made turned out well for my life. And I'm so glad Lawrence is picking up some of these traditions, these kids paying attention to the history. It's certainly been an honor to those older graduates at Downer seeing Lawrence being such a fine school, adopting us, making us part of the whole family.

This is going to conclude the interview.

End [00:21:11]