

Oral History Interview with Marion Longyear Sonderegger
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
October 4, 2008

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JS: Today is October 4th, 2008 this is oral history interview number four for the Milwaukee-Downer Reunion and it is taking place in Briggs Hall 424. Could you please state your name?

MLS: My name is Marion Longyear Sonderegger.

JS: Okay, and what year did you graduate from Milwaukee-Downer?

MLS: 1943.

JS: What did you get your degree in?

MLS: In speech and English.

JS: And why did you choose to attend Milwaukee-Downer?

MLS: Well I think probably my parents chose for me. You know in those days young people didn't have a say in their lives that they do now. And so you just did what your parents said and they wanted me not so far away from home. My brother went east to college and he totaled about three cars while he was there. My mother didn't want that sort of thing to be going on with me, so I was in a more protective environment at Milwaukee-Downer.

JS: And what was the transition like going from high school to college?

MLS: Well it was pretty dramatic for me. I was very supervised at home. My brother was seven years older and so he had long gone from the home, so I was more or less like an only child, and I was very closely supervised, so it was the first time I had been at a place where I made my own decisions and so on. I think it probably took my whole constitution a while to get acclimated to that freedom. And so I didn't do too well my first year at college, but I learned to study and really benefit from what a college education is supposed to do for you.

JS: What were your first impressions of Downer upon starting as a freshman there?

MLS: I thought it was just a magnificent place that was big red brick buildings and you changed rooms to go to different classes and that seemed more kept. Where I grew up was quite a small town and quite isolated. You know that was before the era of even coast to coast radio and there was no television. I mean we had never even heard of it. And the styles were very slow in changing; I would say that we were two years behind times up there. And so being in Milwaukee that was quite a big city and everything was a big advance and change in my life.

JS: I was wondering if you could talk some about Colors Day. What exactly happened with that activity?

MLS: It was quite a formal thing. And you were supposed to wear a white dress, which we did. I noticed some of the color pictures of Colors Day after I was there and I saw kids in blue jeans and pants rolled up and so on. We were not allowed to do that, we wore white dresses with our jackets. And we gathered there in the horseshoe, behind the people that carried the colors and passing them on. It was very solemn, very solemn occasion, and always a beautiful day. And the sun was out and I remember thinking that this is a beautiful thing. It was really nice. We all really liked things like that; we liked those ceremonies that Downer had. It was a very solemn one, the passing the color to the incoming class. And it was always a perfect day then and it marked a progression of the years. That's mainly what I remember and then we all sang. I don't know if each class sang a color song or not, but we did sing our alma mater. And it was always a beautiful spring day or fall day, I don't know which it was but it was one of the big things at Downer.

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JS: Did you participate in Hat Hunt?

MLS: Oh very definitely. I was a freshman and went out there and it was cold and dark and wet when you went out. We dug in the ground and then the sophomores would come around and they were really mean. We knew them all but then all of a sudden at Hat Hunt time they'd turn real mean. And they weren't just, "Hi, hi Longy," it was "Longer! Get up and do five cartwheels!" or something like that, they made you do stuff. My roommate was just a delightful girl and kind of funny, she always was funny, and she had a specialty that she did and they always made her do it, the dance of the seven veils. And she had scarves and stuff and she dropped the veils around them and they would always have her do the dance of the seven veils. That's the kind of thing that they did. You didn't spend a whole lot of time digging in the ground. A little bit of time but then the sophomores would come and make you do these things, sing songs, do skits, various things like that. I remember my very good friends, about seven or eight of us, sat on a ladder that was leaned against a tree. Someone took a picture of us and I still have that picture, just a very nice shot of me and my friends all sitting on this ladder. So we did lots of extra things besides, the last few days is when the real digging took place.

JS: And where did you find the hat that year?

MLS: I really couldn't tell you the exact spot, because that campus was just all woods. There was nothing to delineate it. I don't think even the tennis courts were there for sure. But it was a lot of woods. And they gave you new clues every other day or so, getting you closer and closer to where the hat really was. I wasn't near where the hat was recovered, many of my friends were but somehow or another, I was somewhere else. A very good friend of mine, the picture that was in the presentation, was the year that we found the hat. I recognize the girl and all the others carrying her around on the sootcart(?). And of course she could never touch her feet to the ground all day. It was a big deal.

JS: Yeah it was a very popular tradition it sounds like.

MLS: Yes, it certainly was. You never would have believed it if you hadn't gone there you know. But everybody just threw themselves into it. I didn't know anybody who didn't hunt. Some people might

have elected not to, but it was by far the minority. And we had these banquets afterwards, two or three celebrations. We dressed up very formally and wore your hat, your pin, so it was a very big important thing. I'm glad you kept a lot of the formalities.

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JS: Were you involved in athletics at Downer?

MLS: Yeah, I rowed crew in the spring. I was bow oar because I was shorter than a lot of people. I played field hockey but I never could understand the rules. It was terrible. Now I know the rules of ice hockey, but I feel that field hockey's rules are much more complicated. I never know when I was offside, I was constantly offside. I was really not encouraged or in demand to be on a team, but I was on a team. But, I loved the rowing. I came from Lake Superior, so I had been rowing all my life and I knew all about rowing.

JS: Who were some of the professors that really influenced your life that you had at Milwaukee-Downer?

MLS: Miss Brown was the teacher of freshman English. Emily Brown. She really, I think, imparted to us the whole history and importance of the English language. A lot of people kind of made fun of her and everything and we were all scared of her. She was very intimidating. She had to do it her way and you had to learn and she sought to it that we did. She also put on the Christmas play and the Christmas play was kind of a conglomeration of English traditions. She spent a lot of time standing outside her door looking at the students as they passed by and she would cast the play that way. I remember there was a friend of mine in the class of '43, Marge Daniels, and she said "Ahhh, she looks like Dante! Exactly like Dante!" and she (Marge) had this straight nose coming down, this classic face. I don't know how she worked Dante into the Christmas play but she did. I will just never forget that. I got a love of classics from her. And then I had Miss Hadley, for poetry and English literature. I feel she imparted a love for Chaucer and the Fairy Queen, we read all of those wonderful old classics, Beowulf with her. She just made you love that stuff and it stayed with me all my life. I had Miss Pinney for Zoology. I don't know if other students have told you about Miss Pinney, but she was a character. She had a real love for her Zoology. She knew a lot, her brain was packed full of stuff. She taught us a song about Amphioxus. Anybody ever sing it to you?

JS: No, no!

MLS: It goes kind of like [singing] "It's a long way from Amphioxus! It's a long, long way to us! It's a long way from Amphioxus, to the meanest human cuss! Goodbye scales and..." you know it was about evolution, "Scales and gills! But hello bones and hair! It's a long, long way from Amphioxus! But we came from there!"

[00:14:57]

JS: I never heard that before.

MLS: You've never heard that?

JS: No!

MLS: We all know it and you know, as you can see it stayed with me, in parts. But obviously Amphioxus was some prehistoric fish that evidently started this change from scales to hair and cartilage to bone and so on. So we did really learn stuff.

JS: Yeah you did! Great, well what were some of the other activities that you were a part of at Milwaukee-Downer, like student organizations?

MLS: Well I read May Play, I suppose.

JS: Was that where the May Queen...

MLS: Yes, the May Queen was elected. This play took place outside and we dressed very gorgeously, dressed in kind of 17th century, 18th and 17th century clothes. It was sort of like frolicking on the green. There was a maypole and we learned how to do a maypole dance. To interweave those strands so that they intermingled and it looked gorgeous when it was done. So that was on the grounds there at Downer. And well of course there was Colors Day, which you had mentioned, and Commencement was very impressive. They walked around the horseshoe there and it was into the chapel and that's where commencement was. And then we had a kind of collation afterwards and we all wore our caps and gowns to that. Underclassmen waited on us and put our food in front of us. I have a feeling that that was a tradition that always was that way. I liked that. I liked lantern night. We carried those wonderful things and you felt really,

JS: With the colored paper?

MLS: Really medieval, Yes. Imagine trusting us with the candles and so on. It was just fun and it involved a lot of singing and we sang a lot. That's what we did on lantern night. We went around and sang Christmas carols. Another tradition we had at Christmastime was some of us would go over there and into Johnson Hall. All the faculty stayed in Johnson Hall. And we snuck over there, real quiet, and sang Christmas carols and woke them up. It was the last day of classes before Christmas vacation. I don't know how much they liked that.

JS: I think they liked it.

MLS: You think so? Well I don't know. It was just one of our things that we did. And the older kids, the older classmates told us how to do things like that. That was nice. The upperclassmen involved us younger classmen in their activities. So that's how we learned. And then we involved the young classmen with things. A lot of our activities were centered right in with the college itself, I mean we didn't go to football games and stuff like that. Unless we happened to know somebody that did that kind of thing. I always thought that "Gee this is something" getting off campus, going away somewhere. And of course we did go out on dates and so on, with people that we meet from the mixers.

[00:19:40]

JS: I was going to ask about the mixers. Were they like dances?

MLS: Mm-hmm. And I gather, I don't know how they got the names of people, the officials of the college got their names, but the man that I married I met at one of the mixers. Not until I graduated, but I knew him off and on all the way through school. I remember there was one fellow that kept coming to the mixers, all the time, year after year. He was older, he had already graduated from college, and he asked a lot of us out, different people. We all wore the same fur coat when we went out with him. We would pass it around, it belonged to one of the girls.

JS: I wonder if he ever noticed.

MLS: I don't know! He probably thought that there was something fishy after the tenth or twelfth one wore the same coat. I was going to say one thing big that happened when I was there was the beginning of World War II. Sunday afternoon we were all studying in our rooms and I think I was in the library and then I came back to the dormitory. And they said "Did you hear what happened?" of course there was a symphony concert that afternoon which we all listened to and it was interrupted by the news telling about the bombing at Pearl Harbor. We had a special chapel the next morning and Miss Briggs told us again about it because the only way you heard about anything was by the radio. She said that the one thing that we could do for the war effort, which started right now, was to sing all three verses of the Star Spangled Banner. I thought, "I don't know what good this is going to do!" but you know it made us concentrate on our country. And I think that was one of the main reasons why we started collecting newspapers and tinfoil, I don't know what that was for either but we designated a closet where papers can be put. Everybody smoked in those days so we had to separate the tinfoil from the package and make it into one great big ball out of tinfoil. Before we were ever big time in the war we in Wisconsin were all concerned about England being bombed. But now this meant that we were in it. And all the guys that we went with were all going away into the army and so on. It was a very sobering experience to live through.

JS: Now when you were a freshman Elizabeth Richardson was a senior, is that right? Did you know her at all?

MLS: Yes, I knew the people in that class. They were our big sisters. The girl that was my big sister was Betty Steffen and she was in that class, the purple class. So it was kind of nice that way because you did get to know the upper classmen, they weren't just aloof, although you couldn't get over the feeling that those kids were something special. In another year they were going to be out in the world and so on. So I knew her that way, I didn't know her as an equal, but I knew her as somebody that you looked up to. And she was just a great girl; all of those people that I met in that class I thought were very glamorous. But they were, they were two years older and in those days two years meant a lot. So I did know her and I heard several years later about her being killed, which is just really a shame. She was so very talented, so I was especially glad to see that the other night.

[00:25:02]

JS: It was very nice. We are almost out of time. I was going to ask, going to an all-women's college, going to Milwaukee-Downer, how did that benefit your life, throughout your life after you graduated?

MLS: Well, I don't know. I think it just stayed with me, the various kinds of attitudes towards learning maybe, and towards the things that people had done before me. My love for history and tradition, especially maybe tradition because it was so riddled with tradition at Downer. I really came to value it and love it and see it for what it does for you. It helps civilization take hold and benefit us.

JS: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

MLS: I heard some people talking about how delicious the food was. But I got to thinking in ten years' time, maybe it got more delicious.

JS: It wasn't that good when you were a student?

MLS: No, in fact we went to give blood, we wanted to do something for the war, and a lot of us were turned down because our blood wasn't good enough. And so maybe we weren't getting the nourishment we should have, but they had to save money somewhere and that's where they did. But I don't know, we were served at our tables and we all sat at tables with a faculty member in the middle and we sat around. That was the upperclassmen who sat across and then the rest of us were freshman and underclassmen. They saw to it that the conversation was continued on and it was on uplifting subjects. So that was kind of a job for them to do that. So that everybody didn't just break down and only talk between the two of you, it more or less had to be a general conversation. So there was a lot of thought put into that. We were served at the tables too, we did not help ourselves. You just ate what was put in front of you.

JS: Okay, I'm going to turn off the recorder.

[End: 00:28:18]