

Oral History Interview with Patricia Petersen
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
October 4, 2008

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JS: Today is October 4th, 2008. This is Oral History interview number 1 in Briggs Hall 424. Could you please state your name?

PP: Patricia Petersen. I go by Pat.

JS: And what year did you graduate from Milwaukee-Downer?

PP: 1957.

JS: What did you get your degree in?

PP: My degree was in psychology and science.

JS: Why did you choose to attend Milwaukee-Downer?

PP: Part of it was that I could afford to come, because the scholarships made it possible. It was one of a few schools that was academically where I wanted it and it had home economics, which is what I started in.

JS: What dorms did you live in at Milwaukee-Downer?

PP: McLaren. The memory isn't so good.

JS: It's all right. What was the transition like, going from high school to college?

PP: I had worked so hard in high school to do well and was delighted that I got to college. I got here and was like "Okay, now what?" So, I worked hard again, but it wasn't a real big change except I was away from home with all these women. I made good friends that are still friends.

JS: What were your first impressions of Milwaukee-Downer upon being there as a freshman?

PP: Well, it was a beautiful campus. I walked into my room and my roommate was there ahead of me and the whole room was to her liking and not mine. Super Catholic, religious and so forth, but we managed.

JS: You found a compromise?

PP: More of a compromise on my part but I can ignore stuff.

JS: What were some of the traditions that you participated in, like Hat Hunt?

PP: I participated in Hat Hunt and was the last hunter. It was cold and wet and muddy. The one thing was that the night of the formal, we had mud fights, so everyone was full of mud from head to foot. We ended a little bit early so that people could get cleaned up. But that was funny. The whole dorm was full of newspaper laid on the floor so that people could come in and not wreck the floors. Silly little details.

JS: Where was the Hat that year? Where was it found?

PP: It was found in the jar in a tree.

JS: The formal that was held after Hat Hunt was over, was it to celebrate that the hat had been found?

PP: No, in fact we hadn't found it at that point. Mud fight comes earlier. So we hadn't found it and it was just one of those things that you kind of do and so forth, but it was one of the messy things that pictures are often taken of. That was fine. Everything worked out. They were well prepared. Another thing that I haven't heard anything about this weekend is that we also, as freshmen, stole the sophomore class banner and tried to not let them find it. So, we'd sneak out in the night or early, early morning and get together and go get it wherever it was. That was really fun. Nobody cared except the sophomores. Course then they stole ours back.

JS: How were you able to get out of the dorms because weren't there hours of when you had to be in the dorms?

PP: Oh yeah.

JS: So you just snuck out to get the banner?

PP: If it was in a different dorm. I have to say, I was a big participant. And also in writing our limericks to all the songs and so forth. Another thing that I think was a lot of fun was, I don't remember what we called it, I think it was Cabaret. And the classes wrote their original plays and they were in competition. We thought we were so great as freshmen because we won. Sophomore year wasn't quite as good but we still won. Then we petered out. But we lost about a third of our class.

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JS: Did the Faculty Follies happen while you were there?

PP: Yes, and that was great, seeing them in a very different light. When they were in the dorm with you, at meals with you and so forth, as well as being your instructors, you have a couple of ideas about what they are like, but the Faculty Follies brought out another whole dimension.

JS: They would dress up as other faculty members and the students, right?

PP: Mm-hmm. All the silly mistakes and stuff of the past came right up to the front.

JS: What were some of the Christmas traditions that were at Milwaukee-Downer?

PP: We had a wonderful Christmas dinner and sometimes with a boar's head actually carried in on the tray, lots of singing and so forth. We had a Christmas tree in the dorm, and Ms. Rossberg was our housemother. So we had some German kinds of treats every now and then, especially at Christmas. She was a rather formidable part of the faculty otherwise.

JS: She was probably pretty stern in the dorm.

PP: Very. Enforcing light hours, as freshmen we had those. We weren't supposed to stay up all night, as well as the off campus hours and so forth. Yes, they were enforced. The telephone call, everyone now has a cell phone all the time, but we had to go to the office to pick up our phone call. That's where the only phone was.

JS: One phone for the whole dorm?

PP: Yeah, it's hard to believe isn't it?

JS: Who were some of the professors who really influenced you at Milwaukee-Downer?

PP: I'm having a little memory problem.

JS: Or what did they teach?

PP: Our psych professor, Ms. Hanawalt, Dr. Hanawalt, was a big influence on my life, and we remained fairly close for some years after. She went to Northern Illinois and that's where I started my graduate work. I got to see her a few times there. She had some very strong opinions about hazing and all those things. I happened to be in a couple of sophomore classes as a freshmen, and she'd say "Take off that beanie!" Do this, do that! But she was a very good instructor too, and historically had done lots of things like start schools in China for women. So a good role model. Ms. Calbick was our class advisor. She taught Spanish and she was a pretty jolly person until she got mad. She also had a nice way of looking at the world and sometimes it would come out in different ways. Probably those were the two, but Ms. Hanawalt particularly.

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JS: What were the athletics that you were involved in?

PP: I wasn't involved in anything I didn't have to be. So I took my PE courses but that was it.

JS: So you weren't involved in crew?

PP: No. I had tried it and my hip slipped in the joint and so forth. The premonition of the hip replacements I've had.

JS: Living in Milwaukee, did the Downer girls have opportunities to go out and do different activities in the city?

PP: Yeah, but you have to plan ahead, because of the hours and all that kind of thing. You had to get special permission in order to be extended hours, if you were going to a play or something where you might not get back in time otherwise. But when we did go out downtown, it was hat and gloves. And of course we dressed for dinner twice a week. But you couldn't look real bad anytime.

JS: Right, no jeans.

PP: No jeans. Were they invented?

JS: Did you do any traveling while you were a Milwaukee-Downer student, like on vacations?

PP: Not really. I lived in Racine and there were enough things on the home front for vacations and stuff. My mom had a lot of surgeries and so forth.

JS: Were there activities so that the boys from other schools in Milwaukee could come to Milwaukee-Downer? I think they were called mixers.

PP: Yes, they could. It was always kind of a long shot, whether they'd show up if they said they would. But that really was not a very important part because it was so frustrating.

JS: You said that you started off as home economics and you changed your major. How did you decide to do that, was there something that happened while you were taking courses?

PP: I'd been interested in psychology anyway. I had been reading Freud and Jung when I was in high school. The home economics classes just seemed stupid to me at that point. I had done a lot of the cooking and sewing and one thing or another.

JS: So you decided to change majors. How do you feel attending Downer, attending an all-women's college influenced you and benefited you after graduation?

PP: I probably was more assertive than I would have been otherwise. I'd had a couple of leadership roles there too and I'd had the same thing in high school. It really promoted leadership and cooperation, which is great.

JS: What were the leadership roles that you had while you were a student?

PP: Student Education Association, I started. Some of our class things, I would be one of the project leaders or whatever. But I didn't try to do much more than that because I was working quite a few hours a week, too.

JS: Were you working on campus?

PP: Yes.

JS: Is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to share?

PP: I can't really think of anything now. But I know that I was so well prepared academically that graduate school, especially the master's degree was like, "Oh come on, let's get real."

JS: That's good, that Downer really prepared you.

PP: Oh, yes. Up to a point. When you go into a doctorate program, it's a little different. You've got all the hoops to jump. But yeah, I think I was very well prepared. When I looked around and saw other people struggling, I was very thankful.

[End: 00:16:31]