

Oral History Interviews, Reunion Weekend 2007

Interview with Welton and Marilyn Firehammer, class of 1949

Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow

John G. Strange Commons, Main Hall

Interview #3 for June 16, 2007

[Start: 00:00:00]

1. Could each of you state your name?

M: I'm Marilyn Ericson Firehammer, class of '49.

W: And I'm Welton Bill Firehammer, class of '49.

2. And what did each of you get your degree in at Lawrence?

M: I was a voice major in the Conservatory of Music, and so I got a Music degree.

W: Mine was in Literature with a strong Economics minor.

3. Why did each of you choose to attend Lawrence?

M: I'll tell you how I got here. I was going to try out for a voice scholarship. The weekend I was supposed to be up here, I'm from Rockford, Illinois, the weekend I was supposed to come up here, I got laryngitis. And so I couldn't come and I couldn't sing. So I missed out on that and didn't do anything and didn't do anything. Finally my father said, he told me, "Mary, if you don't decide where you're going to college, you're going to get a job." I said, "Okay, I'll go to Lawrence." I didn't, I had never seen Lawrence, I'd only seen pictures, I never knew a thing. And I had never seen it until I arrived that day.

W: Also, she and her friend had a pact, one was going to go to Ripon for a year, and she was going to go to Lawrence for a year, and then they were both going to transfer to University of Michigan.

M: Neither one of us did. I stayed here for four years, and she stayed at Ripon for four years.

W: Well I had gotten out of the service in November of '45, and I don't remember whether I had enrolled by mail or just planned to enroll in the Engineering School at the University of Illinois to study architecture, which was pretty much my father's idea and not mine. So my home town is Oshkosh, my family then lived in Manitowoc, and I decided to visit some old friends in Oshkosh. And driving from Manitowoc to Oshkosh took me through Appleton on a Friday afternoon. And I saw all the student activity as I drove past the campus, and on a spur of the moment, I decided to stop and inquire about enrolling at Lawrence. I talked to Marshall Hulbert on the telephone, and he made an

appointment to see me the next morning, on a Saturday morning. And I continued on to Oshkosh and visited my friends and came back for the appointment with Marshall Hulbert the following morning and enrolled at Lawrence that day.

M: Isn't that something?

That is.

W: Totally unplanned and unexpected. So I surprised everybody when I got home and told them I had enrolled at Lawrence and nobody had ever heard of Lawrence.

4. Well what were your first impressions of Lawrence upon coming to campus?

W: Well for me, you know, I returned, not returned, but I started Lawrence in January or February of '46 and I think there were about 200 returning veterans in that influx of new men onto campus. Some of them had attended Lawrence before, but like myself, there were a lot of us new to the campus. So there were only about 250 men and 600 women, or something like that, pretty close to that at that time. Girls were impressed with all the returning men.

M: Oh, let me tell you this. My roommate and I were in Brokaw on the second floor facing out this direction, and you know there's that bridge there. And all these guys, we only had like seven men on campus my first semester, we didn't have any men around. So these guys all arrived, and some were walking around, and we hung out the window because we didn't have any screens. We hung out the window and we said, "Wow, look at him, wow, look at him," and we were so excited. Oh, and we grew up very fast, these guys were at least three or four years older than we were.

W: Yeah, I was thinking the statistic that was being kicked around then was that the average age of the incoming freshman men was like three years greater than the average age of the senior women on campus at the time. So there were a lot of matches, good age matches, as far as the marriage prospects were concerned.

M: We girls grew up very fast. All these veterans coming back, those were great days.

W: There was a lot of swapping of war stories.

M: And we girls just sat there, mouths wide open, listening to all these guys, what they did in the service, you know, unbelievable. But it was great; I think the four years at Lawrence were probably one of the highlights of my life actually. Everything went perfectly, nothing ever went wrong.

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That was, I would assume that was a very historical time at Lawrence, because you had the war ending and men returning and continuing with their education.

M: Absolutely, yes. And this morning when we went to Convocation and the choir was singing that first song, I got all teared up, because I was a voice major and I sang solos and we were on the stage. And all I could think of was the wonderful times, and he was in the choir.

W: Dean Waterman, Carl Waterman was director.

M: And I just puddled up, thinking, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe I did that so long ago!" It was great, really great.

5. What were some of the activities that you all were involved in while you were students here?

W: I joined Beta Theta Phi, a fraternity. But an interesting sidelight on that is, when I came on campus, all the dormitories were full of women. So they appealed to the townspeople to take in men students for a semester until they could adjust the housing arrangement. Well, I was assigned to a family, Dr. Gallagher, who was a prominent physician in town. He and Dr. Landis had a joint practice and they were volunteers I think for the college. They did a lot of admissions examinations, they were both active in the Athletics program, you know, over on the sidelines at football games. Anyway, I wound up assigned to the Gallaghers who lived in Washington Street, a couple of blocks off campus. And it was supposed to be for one semester. Well, I wound up staying there for three years.

M: He was like a member of the family.

Yes, you were.

W: Finally, reluctantly, decided to move into the fraternity house my last semester at Lawrence because I had started at midyear but made up credits enough to graduate in 3 and a half years rather than a full four.

M: So we could graduate together.

W: So we could graduate together. I became very close to the Gallagher family, they even offered to put me through medical school if I wanted to go there. Amazingly, I turned them down.

M: Well then, when you turned them down, Mrs. Gallagher said....

W: Oh yeah, then she decided maybe it would be a better idea to send me to dental college because to study orthodontics, because dentists didn't make house calls and they didn't get calls in the middle of the night. Dr. Gallagher did a lot of obstetric work, and I

used to sit telephone for them when they went out. So they briefed me on a lot of the questions to ask panicky husbands and about-to-be mothers. So it was an interesting experience living there and I became very close friends with David Gallagher and Marion too, they were son and daughter of the Gallagher household. They both became doctors.

M: I even dated Dave.

W: Dave and I used to double date. He was between medical school and residency at Chicago Eye and Ear, later set up a practice here in Appleton. But he died quite young, he had a heart defect, had not been in the service because of that. So that was my housing experience.

M: And it was wonderful because we'd go over there and Mrs. G. would make coffee for us and we'd sit in the kitchen and drink coffee.

W: Well Marion attended Lawrence too, Marion Gallagher was a Theta, a formidable field hockey player.

M: Yeah, she was a big girl.

W: Almost as tall as I was. But she moved to California, somewhere along the line she was named woman of the year in Los Angeles.

M: Some family, you talk to older people here and they remember the Gallaghers. They are long gone now, but it was a wonderful experience anyway.

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6. And what kinds of activities were you involved in while you were at Lawrence?

M: Well, I was a Pi Phi, and my roommate was also a Pi Phi. And she and I became co-rushing captains or whatever the heck you call it, we worked real hard at that. And then I became president, I was president and that was kind of fun. And what else did I do? Of course I sang all the time. In fact, I started singing at this church over here, I don't know what denomination it is, on the corner over here.

The Episcopal Church?

M: Yes, I sang there in their choir. And then Marshall Hulbert was my voice teacher, Oh, and he was a wonderful man. He directed a choir that was a Methodist choir in Neenah, he wanted to know if I'd come down and sing in that choir, and be a soloist and get paid. I said, "Well, sure," so they sent a taxicab for me every Sunday and every Wednesday to rehearse. Well, then he (Welton) joined choir too, the two of us went down there and I sang down in that church for about three years. What did I get paid, ten dollars a week? That was a lot of money back then.

W: I didn't get paid.

M: You didn't get paid.

W: It was a package deal.

M: Yeah, right, they got you for free.

W: I had a variety of part-time jobs. I worked for Appleton Water Company for a short time, and then the Athletic Department, I guess you could call it that, at the YMCA, coaching swimming and refereeing basketball, that sort of thing, just overseeing organized play activity at the Y, which was a good job because it kept me really physically active. I'd referee as many as three basketball games a night, which is a lot of running up and down the basketball court.

M: No wonder you were so thin.

W: Yeah, that was many years ago.

M: I'd forgotten about that. Well, that was neat. They were wonderful days, that's for sure. What else did I do? I can't remember.

[00:13:56]

7. Now what was the dating scene like here at Lawrence during that time?

W: The dating scene? I don't know that it was terribly different than it would be at any other time. Other than the fact that the ages were not the same groupings as typically with freshman men and freshman women coming in at the same ages. The big influx of veterans that were three or four years older than the average incoming male freshman made a difference in the atmosphere I think. The men just being so much more mature.

M: That's right.

W: It also made a difference in the quality of the choir. Because the male voices don't mature as early as female voices, so with all these veterans in the choirs in those years immediately following the war. Dr. Waterman often commented on how marvelous it was to have true tenors and strong basses.

M: He was wonderful, he really was. The last time I remember, I think when we were seniors, did he break a leg or something? I know he directed from a wheelchair.

W: I think he broke an ankle or something like that. He had a cast and walked with a crutch and directed. He was such a fearsome guy up on stage. He'd stand up there like this and glaring at the choir and you knew that he was staring directly at you.

M: Oh yeah, he could stare at everybody all at once, "Oh, he's staring at me." Oh, he was great. And you know we went on choir tours and we sang at Pabst Theater in Milwaukee, and what's the theater in Chicago?

W: Concert Hall, I think.

M: Concert Hall.

W: He was a very imposing man, he was about 6' 3" with big shoulders, magnificent head, just a very impressive person, off-stage and on.

M: You know I think about those days, and of course, I always had a solo to sing, and I can't believe I did that. I was so young.

W: And when we came back on choir tours, it was a tradition that Dr. Waterman would sing a song, it was called, "Handsome Harry Thomas."

M: (singing) "Handsome, handsome Harry Thomas,"

W: (singing) "He was sued for breach of promise,
He led Daisy walking down the lane,
Said, don't you dare do tell,
But Daisy went right home and told her mother,
Ma told Pa, and Pa, he told her brother,
Brother told the preacher in the dell,
And the preacher told the wedding bell,
So when you take a girl out walking,
Down the river, down the dell,
Never take a girl named Maude or Mary,
That's the kind of girl you have to marry!
When you take a girl out walking,
Down the river through the dell,
Always take a girl named Daisy,
Cause daisies don't tell!"

M: He sang that. I can't believe you remember all those words.

W: I think it was on our fiftieth reunion, somebody was trying to recall the song. And they searched me out to ask me if I knew it or if I could remember it. I didn't think I could at the time, but then I started to think about it and you know how that goes. You get one line and then the next line suggests itself and first thing you know, you've got it all put together. That was fun.

M: Yeah, we always looked forward to that.

8. Well, besides professors Waterman and Hulbert, what other professors did you all have that really made a big impact on your lives?

W: Bober.

M: What did he teach? I can't remember.

W: Economics. Do you know about Dr. Bober?

Not very much, no.

W: He was quite a fabulous guy. He had some mannerisms that were just great. He'd edge around from one edge of the desk in little mincing steps, and then he'd start back and go all the way over to the other edge of the desk. He had a great wit, such sarcastic wit; he loved to pop questions at you if he thought you were being inattentive. And he'd pop a question, and then proceed to embarrass you if you didn't know the answer. Or to compliment you, "Oh, Mr. Firehammer has been reading his assignment."

M: I didn't take that.

W: Griffiths was another, professor of Psychology that I found very interesting. And of course, Beck, and his Shakespeare class was a highlight. Who was the guy that I did Medieval Literature with? Craig Thompson.

[00:20:20]

M: Oh, I remember him.

W: He and I became quite good friends. He was from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, actually returned there from Lawrence to accept a position as librarian at Dickinson College. And I had attended Dickinson during the war as a part of the Army Air Force cadet program. So we had that in common, and we used to talk about Carlisle and places in Carlisle. Carlisle is a lovely little town and Dickinson was a quaint college, much like Lawrence when I first started here. There were great similarities between Dickinson and Lawrence. Dickinson had a great reputation as a fine liberal arts school, just as Lawrence did. Interesting sidelight, you remember the television program of the contests between teams of four participants, the College Bowl, I think they called it?

M: Yes, that was it.

W: Up to the time that I lost track of the program, there were three schools that went undefeated in however many sessions constituted an undefeated cycle. They were Lawrence, Dickinson, and the University of Wisconsin--Madison.

M: Isn't that something?

W: And I happened to attend all three.

Oh wow, that's great.

M: That's neat. I didn't even realize that.

W: Well, you've heard me tell that story.

M: I know, but I forgot. I'm getting old.

W: Now there may have been schools later on that also achieved an undefeated record, but to my recollection the program ended its run, at the end of its run there were three schools that had been undefeated in the competitions, and it was those three.

M: You know, speaking of professors, of course when we first were here, is the first year they had Freshman Studies. That was brand new from Nathan Pusey. And I can't remember the man's name, but he had gray hair, I remember, and he used to sit on the edge of the desk right here, like this.

W: He was a professor of German.

M: He'd sit like this. And then he had his hand like this and apparently had a paralyzed arm from service or something. And he'd sit there and he'd play with that hand, and it'd be dangling there and he'd play with it. And we'd all get so fascinated looking at that hand, we hardly knew what he was talking about. But I don't think he realized that he was doing it. But I don't know his name. I don't think he was here very long. Freshman Studies, you still have it here?

Yes, we do.

M: It's a wonderful, wonderful, everybody took it. I guess everybody does now.

Yes, they do. They do take it now.

M: I was a Music major, but we still took Freshman Studies, which was neat.

W: Well everybody had to take Freshman Studies, whether you were a Con student or not, that was part of basic required curriculum. I guess it still is, isn't it?

Yes, it is. Freshman Studies the students are required to take.

W: I think the senior experience is an interesting development paralleling in many ways the Freshman Studies.

I think we're really looking forward to doing that.

W: I thought Freshman Studies was a great innovation. That was Pusey's influence, if I'm not mistaken.

M: Oh yes.

W: It introduced incoming freshman to a wide field of endeavor and education to incite their interest in things that they may never have thought about before. I know it did mine in respect to medieval literature. And the philosophy that was much of medieval writing was by philosophers.

9. Well, we're almost out of time for the interview, but I wanted to ask how the two of you met here at Lawrence.

W: I think I was dating Winogene Kellom.

M: She was a sorority sister of mine, older than me.

W: And we double dated with whoever you were with, I don't remember.

M: Yeah, it might have been Dave Gallagher.

W: That's how I first met Marilyn directly, I used to date Marilyn and I dated her roommate, and I dated...

M: Can you believe that? I got every three weeks. The first time I went out with him I said I was going to marry him and it took three years.

W: I was doomed from the outset.

M: He was doomed from the outset, that's for sure. Aren't you lucky? But they were wonderful, wonderful, wonderful days, that's for sure.

W: What are you going to do with all this material?

10. Before I tell you this, I was going to ask if there was anything else you wanted to add before I turn off the recorder.

W: No.

M: I think we've just about done it.

I'll go ahead and turn it off then.

[End: 00:26:27]