

**Oral History Interview with Robert Swain
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
October 25, 2009**

[Start: 00:00:00]

JS: Today is October 25, 2009. We are conducting oral history interviews in the Archives. Could you please state your name?

RS: Robert Swain.

JS: And what year did you graduate from Lawrence?

RS: 1959.

JS: And what did you get your degree in?

RS: Government.

JS: Why did you choose to attend Lawrence?

RS: It was sort of a family school. My cousin Betty Rinn Frederickson's mother graduated from the Con and my Uncle taught here for about ten or twelve years.

JS: What was your Uncle's name?

RS: Frederick Trezise. And I think he taught architecture and engineering. Things like that. Plus, it was pretty convenient [laughs].

JS: Now did you grow up in Appleton?

RS: Shorewood.

JS: What was the transition like going from high school to college? Was it a smooth transition?

RS: Pretty easy [laughs]. Pretty good.

JS: What were the dorms that you lived in while you were a student here?

RS: Brokaw and the Delt House and Whiting Court, because I got married when I was a senior.

JS: And Whiting Court is right over where Alexander Gym is?

RS: Yes, not where it was, but it was over there. They moved the building.

JS: And your wife was a Lawrence student?

RS: She went for about a half a semester and then left and went to school in Milwaukee.

JS: How did you meet here at Lawrence?

RS: I met her in high school [laughs]. We dated from 1954, got married in '58.

JS: And you said you lived in the Delt House.

RS: Yes.

JS: So that was the fraternity that you were involved in.

RS: Yes.

JS: What were some of the activities that the fraternity did?

RS: I think a year or two before I started, the Delts had a pretty bad reputation [laughs]. They were party people. And the grade points weren't so good. And when I was a freshman, the upperclassmen decided they would change that, so they had mandatory study halls at the fraternity house, they had a lot of interest in student government, participating in Prom King campaigns, and that sort of thing. I've got three fairly prominent Lawrence fraternity brothers. Hurvis, who funded the bridge and several...he was a year behind me and was a treasurer. And then Fetterly, who I think is currently on the board. Jim Fetterly and Tom Kayser, who also I think is currently on the board, were a year ahead of me. So they were the kind of people that were pretty active in student affairs and things.

JS: Now there is a story you shared about a sign that went up when...

RS: Oh yeah. The fraternity had pretty substantial archives and the secretary was in charge of the archives. And I think I was the secretary one year. And in going through the archives, I found an article that had been in *The Lawrentian* from...might have been 1948. Probably 1948. About the fact that the Delts had put up a big sign. The Delt House being where it is was a great place to put up signs, and Prom King campaign things and Homecoming things were on display. But they put up a sign that said "We Prefer Earl's Girls to Harry's Canary." "Earl" was Earl Warren who was running for the Republican nomination for President and Truman was running for his first full-term as president. Earl Warren had, I don't know, two or three daughters, and Harry Truman had Margaret, who was his daughter and she was a singer...had some aspirations of being an opera singer or something like that. So there were some...Harry got pretty mad at some critics, who had not kind things to say about his daughter. But that was one of the signs. The Prom King campaigns almost always had big signs that covered the front of the house. That was a big deal at that time. Decorate the house.

[00:05:31]

JS: What were some of the particular decorations that you used for Homecoming for the Delt House?

RS: I remember one year they had a ski slope. They brought it all the way from the roof down. See, keep in mind that at that time, Lawe Street actually had two parts to it. Part of it went down the hill and the other part went right in front of the fraternity houses, and then you went around the corner onto John Street and you could keep on going down the hill across the river on the old John Street Bridge. So there was more room in front of the fraternity houses than there is now. Wasn't a very wide street, it was a

little one-way thing. So you could build stuff that came off the house and actually came down onto the grass and sometimes came right out into the street. They really didn't care that much. But they had a ski slide and I think one year, they had a football bowl with stick figures and things like that.

JS: I was wondering if you could share the stories about the helicopter and the airplane?

RS: Oh yeah. The year that Jim Fetterly and his now wife – I can't remember her name. Anyway, Fetterly and his girlfriend at that time, he was running for Prom King and one of my fraternity brothers Garr Steiner's father was an airline pilot and had his own private plane. And Garr was allowed to fly it back and forth to the old airport which was on Ballard Road, the Appleton Airport was on Ballard Road, where Shannon's is and the National Guard Army is. And he flew it up and we took a car and we went over to the airport and tied a rope around the front wheel of the...it was a Piper Tri-Pacer, I think. And we towed it through the streets of Appleton all the way down to the fraternity house and when the Prom King parade came up, whenever it was, Friday or Saturday, we towed it right down the middle of College Avenue with Jim and his wife sitting on the wing. I don't know if that picture is in the bunch, but I did have a picture of it somewhere of the two of them sitting up on the wing. Judy, that's what her name was.

JS: And did he win Prom King?

RS: I don't even know if he won [laughs]. I don't remember if he won that year. And then the helicopter? Um, well there were two other things. One year a helicopter, and I don't know why, but it might have been for some recruiting thing for the ROTC, landed in the space between Worcester Art Center and the Union. There was a little, not much, but there was a space there and it landed there. And another time, it landed down, a helicopter landed down roughly where the tennis courts are. And then the year that Fetterly was running and we had that airplane, we took the door off the airplane, the one on the passenger-side door, and we had a hand-cranked fire siren that was really loud and I got into the plane and sat on the passenger seat and Garr Steiner flew the airplane and we flew very low over the campus, throwing leaflets and cranking that fire siren and just flew around over the campus. Way below the FAA altitude [laughs]. But again, nobody really cared that much. I mean, you could do stuff like that without winding up in jail.

JS: Did you have to get permission from the city of Appleton when you were pulling the...

RS: Well, they had the parade, I don't know if they had a permit for the parade. But the parade happened every year, whoever connected with the city to make sure they could do it had done it. It might have been somebody from the college who made that arrangement, but every year there was Prom King campaign. And a Prom King parade. There was a Homecoming parade. Now, they were running for Homecoming king, not Prom King. Because the Prom was in the spring, Homecoming was in October probably. And the Homecoming parade was a bigger deal.

[00:10:42]

JS: Cool! Were you ever involved in any activities regarding the Rock? The boulder that was moved all over campus?

RS: No. I never got involved in moving the Rock or painting the Rock. But the event that occurred involving the Rock, which I remember more than almost anything else, was one year, and I think I was a freshman. I'm pretty sure I was a freshman. And Halloween was on a Monday, I think. And Monday night was when the fraternities all had their fraternity meeting, so all the pledges and all fraternity members were all in the Quad at the same time on Monday evening. And word went out that there was going to be a bunch of town kids coming to the campus and they were going to paint the Rock. And so everybody was waiting for this to happen and we were down in the meeting and the word went out, "They're coming. They're coming." And I mean, the quad just emptied en masse. And I think that at the time, the Rock was over near what was North House. Do you know where North House was?

JS: No, I don't.

RS: Well, the chapel was here and North House was right behind the Chapel in what's now part of the Conservatory arcade that goes across from the Chapel to the original thing. And I'm pretty sure that the Rock was over in North House. Somebody had stolen it and put it there. So en masse, the fraternity goes swarming across the campus to protect the Rock from the town kids. And there was a fairly serious fight that went on. Two guys, I remember, the word was they were from the South side of Chicago and they literally took socks, put bars of soap in them. That's like a black jack and it can be very deadly, and they were whacking the town kids who were trying to get at the Rock. And everybody went scattering. I later found out that the Appleton PD was on motorcycles at that time. They had a lot of motorcycles with sidecars and I later found out, one of the cops had...the cops let this go on. There was fighting going on for a little while and all of a sudden they came swarming in and the word was, the cops had said, "You guys scatter, we'll get the townies." Now later when I moved back here, I later met one of the guys who was there, who was still a cop.

Then they went over and I don't know if this was the same time, but I kind of think it was, because it was all around Halloween and there were a lot of town kids, just all around the campus. I don't know if they decided to have a panty raid, or if that's just what came up, but they went to Ormsby and if you look at Ormsby on the west side of the building, there's what looks now like a sealed door at ground level. And that door was open. You could get in and out of the building through that door. The town kids were all rushing around and some of the fraternity guys had the door open and they were sending the town kids into the dorms and saying, "Go in there and raid the place! Raid the place!" And one kid came back out and he was crying and he said one of the counselors almost flattened him with a sorority paddle, he got up out of the floor. And another kid came out and was like, he was almost crying. And I saw him and asked, "What's the matter?" And he said, "Look at my jacket!" His leather jacket was all covered with red. He said, "she threw nail polish on my new jacket!" So that was all involved with the Rock and going after the Rock. That was my involvement with the Rock. I didn't hit anybody [laughs].

[00:16:00]

JS: Well, I was going to ask about, you were involved with the publication of *The Contributor*? I was going to ask what that was exactly?

RS: It was a literary magazine that students made contributions to of poetry or short stories and things like that.

JS: Kind of like what the *Tropos* is today?

RS: What what is?

JS: *Tropos*?

RS: I don't know what *Tropos* is!

JS: It's this annual publication that comes out of poetry...

RS: Yeah, I think it came out once or twice a year. John Liebowitz, I think, was the editor one year. And there's also a classmate named Jamie Beck. I think he goes by Jamie now, but we knew him as Jim. His father taught English.

JS: Warren Beck.

RS: Warren Beck. And he wrote for it. A lot of people wrote for it. It was fun.

JS: And you also wrote for *The Lawrentian*?

RS: A little. And *The Collegian*, about which you know nothing. You can't find anything. Which is too bad. The guy who started it might even have copies, but I have no clue where he might be. His name was Richard Halloran. And he started it, because I think I saw in Charlie Breunig's book, that the predecessor for *The Lawrentian* really was a paper called *The Collegian*.

JS: Yes, it was. Yes.

RS: And so that was the paper that Halloran started, calling it *The Collegian*, arguing that *The Lawrentian* was becoming too stodgy and too much a tool of the administration and not publishing anything controversial, or about things that were going on that the administration might not want to talk about. So I think that lasted two years, maybe. Halloran also created the thing I think I told you called the Register, which was an early Facebook. Or what do they call it? A Zoobook? And he started it in '57 or '58. Did it one year and I helped him, and he graduated and I did it in '59, and then I graduated and one of my fraternity brothers did it in '60, and I don't know what happened to it after that.

JS: I think it kept going for years and then it was renamed the Zoobook, I believe. I'm very glad to have that, because when classes come back for Reunion, they use the Registers and the Zoobooks. So, yeah.

And then you were involved in some of theatrical productions here on campus?

RS: No. My roommate was. He was a theatre major, but I think I was in a play. Every student who was...he was not a theatre major, but he was taking theatre from Ted Cloak. And he dragooned me into being in a play one time.

JS: Well, where were the play held, because this was before the Music-Drama was...

RS: In the basement of the Union.

JS: Oh, okay.

RS: When you come down the steps on the right, is what. With the riser? That is kind of a lounge now? You come down the steps and turn right and you're walking toward the river and the outside door. On the right there's a lounge of some kind?

[00:20:14]

JS: Oh yes, the Coffeehouse.

RS: On the left is the Viking Room? That was the theatre. That's where they did the productions. Well, it worked out pretty well. There wasn't even a Conservatory as there is. The Conservatory went up in '60...no '59. Did anybody ever tell you about the Sig Eps? The Sig Eps painted the Sig Ep sign on the wall as you walk towards Chapel, old Conservatory on the left? You look up, there's a large brick face on the second floor. And they got up there and they painted a Sigma Phi Epsilon in big white letters. It took years for that to go away. They tried to get it off, but they had just stained the brick. You can still see it 10 or 15 years later.

JS: Well were the students or faculty excited about having this new Music-Drama Center as it was being built in the late 1950s?

RS: Well, you know probably maybe the Con more than the regular students. There was not the connection between the Con and the regular students that I think there is today. There seems to be much more of a share, I don't know that for a fact, but it just seems that way. And, I mean, a lot of students didn't go out to Conservatory performances, didn't go to Artist Series. They just didn't. Too bad.

JS: Did you work with WLFM?

RS: Yeah.

JS: Okay, where was the station back then?

RS: In the basement of the old Observatory. So you...if you were looking at the Observatory from the campus itself, there was a walk that went around and back and down the hill and then a back door, and it was a really small studio that was tucked in around and back. And then they had the tower, they had the radio tower that was right there, too. And, I don't know, when did it start? '56, I think? And they were looking for students who wanted to be on air and I said, "Yeah, that sounds like fun." And I

remember going to kind of orientation classes on the fourth floor of Main Hall. In one of the classrooms up there, because I don't think the 4th floor was divided up the way it is now. But yeah, I had a program that was on I think once a week, or twice a week called "Date Night." You know what date nights were?

JS: No.

RS: The fraternities had... you could not have women in the fraternity houses, except on date night. And date night was I think Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, until 9:00 or something like that. And so I had a program called "Date Night" and tried to play music I thought was reasonably romantic [laughs], because the rule was you had to have both feet on the floor and a light on, but of course the lights were so dim, you couldn't see a thing. But people would go down to the basement and sit around and make out. And I had this radio show called "Date Night." It was on for a couple of hours. It was fun. But I would bring my own records. And it was records, no tapes. Nobody had a tape.

JS: Well besides the radio station being in the basement of the Observatory, what else was in the Observatory at that time?

[00:24:37]

RS: ROTC. The ROTC Headquarters was there. So they had all of their ROTC classes in the Observatory in the Headquarters. And there was a professor of air science. His name was Woody Nold and maybe three officers, all captains, maybe one was a major, and about three or four NCOs. One of whom wound up as the president of Fox Valley Tech, Lee Griswald, I think his name was. I think he was a sergeant. You know that printing shop that's up on North Oneida Street, just as you go over the tracks? The guy who started that was a ROTC sergeant who retired here and stayed. And then Woody had probably the best story about the ROTC. Woody had a propeller blade. Somewhere he picked up a fairly large propeller blade, it stood maybe six or seven feet high. And he had it painted "ROTC Lawrence College" and his name. It was in the front vestibule of the Observatory. And, horror of horrors, one night it disappeared. And I think I was probably a sophomore, because I remember one of my fraternity brothers was a senior, and he pulled all of the ROTC guys out and said, "Where's Woody's propeller?" And they said, "We don't care who took it and there will be no discipline inflicted, but we want it back! No questions asked, just bring it back." Now you would probably have to confirm this from somebody else, but I am very sure that this happened. The convo in May is the honor's convo and they announce all of the awards for this and for that, and they came to an ROTC award that goes out to one of the seniors or sophomores for [?] Society or something like that. So Woody in his uniform gets up to announce this award. And all of a sudden there's a titter of laughter that ripples through the audience and then a little more. And I think he thought that he had said something funny and thought, "ha ha, I'm a funny fellow." He wasn't a funny fellow. And then somebody called his attention and he turned around and the curtains of the back of the chapel had parted and there was his propeller right behind him up on a little stand. Well, he got it back [laughs]. Yeah.

I'll tell you, I don't know if you want this as historical or not. His son Woodrow Junior was the subject of one of the niftiest plagiarism putdowns I ever, ever saw. In fact it was the first plagiarism putdown I ever saw. We were in Freshman Studies and the Prof was...he taught art. His name was Charlie Brooks. He

was such as neat guy. And so we had a paper to write and the word in the fraternity was “help your brothers,” and I knew how to hunt and peck pretty fast. And so I got recruited to help Woody type up his paper. And I remember sitting there typing it up and thinking, “Jeez, this guy is smarter than I thought he was. That’s pretty good stuff.” Until we got to the end and then all of a sudden it sort of went downhill at the very end. And I thought, “hmm.” So we go to class and Charlie is handing the papers back and going around saying comments about this paper or that paper. Comes to Nold and he says, “Mr. Nold, what do you think the concept of a phrase, ‘the class of 2009,’ is?” “Uh.” “Well, Mr. Nold, let’s talk about...” and he would had another quote or phrase. “Uh.” He couldn’t explain what he had put in his own paper, and finally he said something to the effect, “Mr. Nold, you realize there are scholars in this world who spend an entire lifetime studying a subject and they learn about it, and they research it, and finally after years, perhaps, or even decades, they reach some conclusions and publish their findings. And that’s their magnum opus! It’s the sum total of all of this work they’ve done. Don’t you think Mr. Nold that when somebody has done all of that work on something, that they are owed even the slightest credit for their work?” And he copied the whole damn thing out of some book someplace and had no clue what he was writing about. I mean, he wrote down stuff and didn’t understand what he was writing about! But I thought that was the niftiest putdown of plagiarism...he got an F. And Woody dropped out of school shortly after that, he didn’t finish his freshman year. But I thought that was the niftiest putdown...I mean, now I understand what college is all of about. I’m learning what college is all about [laughs].

[00:31:30]

JS: With regards to Freshman Studies, did you have a work you enjoyed studying the most in that course? Or one that you liked the least of having to read for Freshman Studies?

RS: I liked Plato. And I liked, although I tried to reread it and I still don’t understand all of it, William Faulkner *Light In August*. We read that. They were interesting. It depended so much on the professor. Brooks taught the Faulkner. Merton Sealts, who taught English, taught Darwin. Graham Waring was a Religion prof and he taught a section and I can’t remember, because we had four profs for four sections. And the one I liked least was Schleiermacher’s *On Religion*. But I didn’t read it. Tell me a student who doesn’t read something...But the exam was coming up in the class, so I pulled it out, started looking through, came across a paragraph and thought “Oh, that’s kind of interesting.” And I went back and I thought about it a little bit and reread it a little bit. Would you believe that was the exam? That one paragraph out of this book was about that paragraph that I think I did pretty well on that exam [laughs]. That was pure luck, but I liked Freshman Studies. I really did. Some didn’t like it. It depended to some extent on the prof, but I think Brooks and Sealts were just terrific guys. I think Brooks taught the first segment of it and I’ve told others, I think he got me off on the right foot, because he was such an interesting guy. And the way he handled the class. Some could’ve been a difficult class.

JS: In addition to Charlie Brooks, who were some other professors whose classes you really enjoyed taking and the professors made a significant impact on your life?

RS: Len Weis. Do you know him? He's still around! He's a member of my church, member of a club, a retired professor of Geology from UW-Fox Valley where he taught until he retired. He taught Geology. Warren Beck, who I really loved. Brooks. I'm trying to think...and Bill Riker. Bill Riker. He's the one who got me to go into law school and taught me how apply to Madison. "Go for it," he said, "you can do it, go for it, shoot high." I wound up going to Michigan instead. Beck wrote a book. You can have the book. He wrote a book called *Final Score* and I got an autographed copy. I wrote an essay on *Heart of Darkness*. He gave it back and he said, "I think you missed the boat." And he said, "Take a look at it," and I looked at it again and I thought, "No I didn't, I think I got it right." And so he said, "Okay if that's the way you feel about it, I'm going to submit it for one of those prizes..." And I won the damn prize! So I thought, "Well, that's okay." And he loved it, he loved it. He said, "That's what I like." He said, "I want a student who doesn't take what I say as gospel. If you think I'm wrong, tell me I'm wrong!" Unfortunately he had health problems later in life, but I liked him.

[00:36:04]

JS: Well in addition to Homecoming and The Rock, were there other traditions at Lawrence going on at that time?

RS: Hmm, well, yeah. There were a lot of traditions. Homecoming was a big deal. My roommate and I went out and did some midnight requisitioning at a construction site for materials to build one of our floats [laughs]. I'm trying to think of anything...traditions. If you would consider, for example, playing bridge in the Union a tradition, everybody played bridge. The Union was full. You'd come back from a Christmas vacation, Thanksgiving vacation and Sunday night, and the Union was open Sunday night and people were all sitting around and drinking Coke and playing bridge. That was the thing to do. Play bridge. There was gambling going on in the fraternity houses. I don't know if you would call it tradition, but you couldn't drink on campus, and so one of my fraternity brother's father owned Fox River Paper Company right across the bridge at the bottom of Lawe Street Hill, you go across the bridge and then the road makes kind of a loop like that? And off to the left there's a grassy area. Well, they owned that, so we went to him and said, "Would you lease us that little corner of the property? There's nothing on it." And he said, "Sure." So we actually drew up a lease and paid him about ten dollars a year or something like that. It was a legitimate lease, and then we had beer parties, because it was off campus. So we'd have parties over there and we could drink beer. You understand you could drink beer at age 18.

JS: Yeah, and now it's 21.

RS: Freshmen, the first Sunday night you were on campus had to go to dinner at a church. Brokaw simply shut down the mess hall, and Brokaw had its own mess hall in the basement. So you had no choice but to go to a church. You could go to any church you wanted, but you had to go to a church. About five guys and I went over to the Methodist Church and five of us wound up as fraternity brothers, too, even though it was like three days after we had arrived on campus. So you go over and you have dinner, and then they announced there was going to be square dancing and we were sitting there thinking, "This is not why we came to college" [laughs]. So the five of us went out to the john, the men's

john, and I don't know if you know that church, but there's a men's john in the basement, and all of a sudden the door opens, this woman walks in and says, "Come on boys! Square dancing!" [laughs] "Not on your life." There's a back door to that church that is still there. Run up the stairs, out the door and you wind up in the parking lot and we all beat it out the back door, went downtown to a beer bar on College Avenue, which is probably roughly where...do you know where Gimbel's was, the Thrivent building there, or whatever building is there on the corner of Morrison? In that block there was a beer bar called The Villa and that's where we all wound up and had our first college beer rather than square dancing.

[00:40:30]

JS: I was going to ask, now when you come back to Lawrence as an alum and you've lived in the area for so many years, how has Lawrence changed throughout the years and how has it stayed the same?

RS: Well, physically it's a lot like it was. There were obviously new buildings replacing old buildings, but the basic layout is very familiar. Main Hall is very familiar and the Chapel is very familiar and even the Union was there. Sage was there and Ormsby was there and all that sort of thing. So in that way. But it's hard to say as far as the ambiance on campus what it's like now. I mean, yeah, I'm auditing a class. I just came from a class with Marty Finkler and you see all of the students wandering around, but they still look like students and they act like students and they don't...oh, they dress somewhat sloppier [laughs], but not a lot. Not a lot. And they seem to have all the same interests and the same anxieties and the same problems. So I'm not sure that it's changed all that much.

JS: Well, is there anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to?

RS: Off the record I'd like to tell you one story [laughs].

JS: Okay, we can do that after I turn off the recorder.

RS: Okay.

JS: Is there...

RS: I got married my senior year and so we lived at Whiting Court and it was a different place, it was a different year, completely different year. In a lot of ways it was more fun, I think than a lot of seniors had, because Whiting Court was essentially a co-ed dorm, not a nerd student's quarters. And we had a great time out there. We got snowed in one time. So it was fun and one of the residents had two kids or three. You could drink. I could sit in my living room and watch football games out the front window, because it was at the end of the field looking out over the upper football field. That was fun.

Hell Week, there is no such thing as Hell Week anymore. Keep in mind, fraternities were everything. If you didn't live in a fraternity House, you had very limited places to live. Peabody House, do you know where Peabody House was? Probably about right where we're sitting. And North House, which was kind of a non-fraternity-minded male place to live. And a couple of others. So everybody was in fraternities. And sororities for that matter. And the Panhel House. Do you know where the Panhel House was? That

was a hangout place. You could go out and neck at the Panhel House and things like that. The pictures of Colman burning are in that pile.

JS: Oh yeah, when it was being built.

RS: Appleton was a pure white town. I don't even remember if there was a black student at Lawrence, come to think of it. I think if you look through the Ariels, I don't think you'll see any black students, or maybe one. It was tough town for blacks to come to.

They used to have, I don't think they do that anymore, they used to have public programs at the Chapel, not music-related. But they would rent it out to people who came and wanted to give a speech or talk. There wasn't any really, other than the Chapel, there was no auditorium place, other than the high schools, where people could go and give speeches. I remember one year, a guy named the Reverend Valdez came and he was a tub-thumping revivalist type minister and I went over and watched that. And it was a show [laughs], it was a real show. One of my fraternity brothers got so carried away, he went back to the fraternity house and poured out his alcohol supply to which the next morning he was very regretful [laughs]. He had second thoughts about it. But they did things like that. John Harmon played jazz concerts in the Union when the Conservatory thought, "jazz? Jazz?" And they were packed. They were almost always packed. He used to come over to our fraternity house and practice piano, you know the way those houses stick out in the front? We had a little piano stuck out in front and he would come over and play piano. I don't know, that's about it.

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

[End: 00:46:35]