

Oral History Interview with Judith McNatt
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow
June 16, 2007

[Start: 00:00:00]

JS: This is oral history interview number 5 for June 16, 2007. Could you please state your name?

JM: Judith McNatt.

JS: What year did you graduate from Lawrence?

JM: Class of '67.

JS: What was your degree in?

JM: American History.

JS: You originally started off at Milwaukee-Downer. Why did you choose to attend Milwaukee-Downer?

JM: I was from the Midwest originally. I was from Tulsa and my family lived in New York, so I wanted to come back out to the Midwest to go to school. I said I wanted a small girls' school in a city and so I started out in Milwaukee in the small girls' school in the city. Six weeks into the term, they called us all in together into convocation and Stone was the head of the Board of Trustees and very stone-like. And now it's the merger. Of course, we were all very emotional about it, those of us who were just starting were saying, oh my goodness, we chose this school and were just starting our school career and it's crashing down. That's the way we felt at that time. People were in tears. I'm sure the faculty were thinking, oh my goodness, what am I going to do? I think for the most part the then juniors, most of them transferred up here. Most of the freshmen did not. I was one of seven freshmen to come, because they didn't have a vested interest in Milwaukee-Downer. They could go anywhere, they were just starting. Some of them transferred in mid-year, some at the end of the year. I think I stuck around just kind of inertia. I said, okay, I'll go with the merger. So I ended up in a small town with a co-ed college [laughs]. And I'm glad. I'm happy for Lawrence, I donate every year. I don't think the transition was a good one. And I kind of would like somebody to know that. That they should have done better, because the Lawrence teachers were threatened by the Downer teachers coming up. I remember people would say of me, "oh, well you're the good Downer girl," or "you're one of the good ones." Like, the others weren't nice? [laughs] I was one of the nice Downer girls. What did they think we were like? We were a threat to them, we were intruding and they were not making it easy for us. I remember the economics teacher, Mr. Bloch. He was very young and new and so he was ornery anyway, because he was so young and new. Intro to Economics my sophomore year. I remember he would ask a question, everybody was kind of afraid of him, because he was tough and we all did poorly on the midterm and everything. He asked me a question, or I couldn't answer it, or something. And he said, "we're not at Milwaukee-Downer now," in a snotty way. So it was not so easy and the only other thing was that because I didn't come as a freshman, everything was oriented to freshmen orientation. So if you didn't come as a

freshman, you didn't get a sense of the class and that was a mistake, especially that next year when we all came up. They should have done something for us. So if something like that ever happens again, I would recommend having orientation every year for all of the classes, not just the freshmen. Although I liked Lawrence, I don't remember some of the same things, I didn't get that orientation.

I have memories of Milwaukee-Downer. It was charming, it was so old-fashioned even then. There were only 120 of us left or something. I think there were 32 in my class, in my freshmen class. And that's just not enough to sustain. Girls' schools, particularly in the Midwest, were passé at that point in the '60s. A lot of them died off, I think. We had 40 acres of beautiful grounds and these beautiful old buildings. I forget Merrill, Johnson, and something else. Holton. They had these lovely clocks, old clocks that are now I think at the library. The old grandfather clocks. The lovely woods. But we were right across from UW-M, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and they basically bought the land and probably turned it into a parking lot. But while I was there we did the last of this tradition and that tradition and I remember they had Faculty Follies, which was wonderful. We loved it. I remember we painted big signs, advertising Faculty Follies. So the students got involved that way, by painting all of the signs. So I remember being down on the floor, probably in Johnson Hall or something painting signs. The faculty were hysterical.

[00:06:12]

JS: Yeah, the faculty would impersonate each other...

JM: They would also do something, it was a Greek theme that year. Because I remember, and I can't think of his name off hand, but all of the girls fell in love with him. He was the English teacher at that time. Constantine...I thought of it the other day, but I can't remember right now. He was new and he was from Greece and I remember playing the Grecian urn or something. And then Dorothea Harvey, she was lovely, she was the religion teacher. I have pictures someplace and I have a scrapbook as I told you before that I will probably be glad to give, if anybody has any interest, because I did make a scrapbook of that year, because it was the last year. So I was more conscious of that than I would have been otherwise. So I think it was wonderful tradition.

I remember Hat Hunt.

JS: Yeah, tell me about that last Hat Hunt.

JM: I don't remember a lot, except that we didn't find it. Marilyn somebody found it, I didn't find it. You'll know more than I, if you know the history. I only have glimpses. Each class would look for the hat and somebody had left it behind years before, some man visiting, or professor. I don't remember now. And so the tradition built up of looking for the hat. It was hidden every year and it was a rivalry among all the classes to find the hat. Also, each class had different colors, so mine was the Green class. The freshmen, which was the last of the entering classes was green. We had dark green blazers, they were forest green. So we did everything by color and class. There were four colors – red, gold, green, and I think, purple, not blue. I have a picture of when the girl found it. It was in the woods in the mud. And

people raised her up on their shoulders. And I think I have a picture of her wearing the hat. It was a man's top hat. But that was such a builder of class spirit. Those traditions, there was a lot of class spirit.

I remember we had a sister class, the sophomore were kind of mentors to us. We collected ribbons. I kind of forget, Julia, what the ribbons ... was that during the Hat Hunt that we collected the ribbons? I still have my ribbons. And you wore them on the inside of your blazer and collect them, either for different clues, or different achievements. Maybe someday, I'll remember this. And I might have said this, because I wrote in the scrapbook, I might have actually said something about that. Because I remember collecting the ribbons and I remember then they were pinned inside. It was more like a hazing almost with the freshmen class, somehow. But a sophomore, I can't think of her name...Katherine Reichbach, or something like that, she passed down to me two things. The older kids passed down to me two things. One was a little gun, a little cap gun, about this big and I pinned it to the ribbons. And I was given that for being the most gung-ho, not gun, but gung-ho freshman, enthusiastic freshman, in other words. I would have passed it down to somebody else, but I got these things because there was nobody else to pass them on to. I would have gotten them anyway, but I would have passed them down. So I still have that. I think it was she who gave me the doll. Now the doll is important, because it was probably from the '30s. It was old then. Kind of falling apart, but the doll was about this long, a floppy doll. A soft, rag doll dressed with a blazer. Dressed as a Milwaukee-Downer with a little sailor cap that said "MDC" and I have that. And my daughter is not going to know nothing about that, so probably it should come here. It's in a trunk in my attic someplace, so that's really what got me thinking when I went to your class yesterday. It's not so much what I say as, well I have those things. And since I was the last class and there were only seven of us who came up here of the freshmen, and I remember the teachers who transferred up. In fact, I saw Mr. Purdo at lunch. I didn't know who he was and I suddenly looked at his sign and I remembered him, because he was from Milwaukee-Downer. So was Marjory Irvin and I haven't seen her yet, but hear she's here. She was lovely. She must have been my advisor. I only took one class, I took Intro to Music that year that she taught, but she must have been my advisor, because I remember talking to her one point. She was lovely. My religion teacher, I think it was Dorothea Harvey. I'm not sure if she is still alive, she was lovely. She was Swedenborgian, was her religion, which was totally new to me, totally new to most people, but that was impressive that she was and that I could remember it. She taught me religion. The Spanish teacher... again, we had fond memories, because it was such a small class. We had so few students and they were all girls, so there was more concentration. The president, I don't remember her.

[00:12:51]

JS: Was it Mr. Johnson who was...

JM: I suppose so, but there was a woman, so maybe she was the dean. This was a holdover from a finishing school mentality, because she had all of us girls in small groups for a dinner. We had frogs' legs, and that was the first time I had frogs' legs. And that was because you should learn manners and you should learn how to eat frogs legs. We probably had white gloves and heels on. We knew then that that was a holdover, but I thought it was kind of nice. It was a small group dinner, where we were supposed to behave and that, of course, is just ancient history. Nobody does that anymore. And they didn't any

place else probably. There were there holdovers at Milwaukee-Downer. I guess Johnson was the president, I remember his face, but I don't know who she was, but it was a woman who did this.

And then the Downer Room, I remember that. The Teakwood Room, I mean, came over. But those traditions, I think, mostly it was the class spirit, which we had so much that first year, and then nothing by the time I came here. We were all scattered, but those of us...we survived. Eventually we were absorbed into Lawrence and I was glad I graduated from Lawrence, that I didn't go anywhere else. So it was good move, it was just a little bit tough. But the teachers got absorbed into it, but it was just a difficult time for everybody.

JS: How was the attitude at Milwaukee-Downer for that last year?

JM: It was sad. Everything was sad. But gung-ho, it was sad, but we did things with a flourish, I think, because we knew it was going to be the last one. But especially I remember the Hunt and the Faculty Follies. There were probably some other things...

[00:15:15]

JS: Did Lantern Night occur that year?

JM: That sounds really familiar, too.

JS: Around the Christmas season?

JM: Yep, it must have. But until you said that, I hadn't remembered that. But the fact that I remember the term, means that we must have had it. I remember seeing pictures, I probably have pictures of that.

JS: Did the classes participate in crew races in the spring?

JM: Oh yes! I was on the crew team! I had forgotten. Yes! Thank you, okay. As we run out of time, I finally remember the crew team. I had never been in a boat before, not a shell. But yeah, I have a picture someplace, we lost to the faculty and I remember Miss Harvey was probably the person who said "stroke." I forget that title. We lost, it was embarrassing that we lost to the faculty. We lost to everybody. It was the freshmen, I don't remember each year, I don't remember who won, but then probably the losers played the faculty and then we lost to the Faculty. But it was such good spirit. Those were fun things with a small girls' school that you could do that were meaningful at the time. And it exposed us to different things.

JS: And it probably built strong leadership skills, because...

JM: I suppose, because I hadn't even thought of it that way, but just doing those different things, that's right. That was the last of the crew team, too. So there were other last things. I remember walking into the dining room. I think it was old wood paneled, and there again, it looked like out of a movie from the '30s or something. But I think that's about all I remember.

JS: Did the Milwaukee-Downer faculty and students who came to Lawrence, did they continue that bond?

JM: Not really. I don't think so. Maybe I'm just forgetting. I mean we saw each other around, but I think we just needed to absorb into the larger community. I just felt sorry for the faculty, because they were not met with welcome arms, so I felt sorry for that. Mr. Dale...some of them were older. Some of the younger ones went elsewhere. But some of them just came, and I think eventually they were better off too, but it was just the first year. And I think they stayed and I think that they enjoyed it, but it was just kind of threatening for the faculty that were here suddenly had to absorb however many, not that many, because it was a small school. But we didn't stay as a cluster. I'm not aware of that. Which was probably good. We had to get ourselves into...

JS: Were there any Lawrence professors who were very encouraging and did make...

JM: Oh, I had some wonderful teachers. They weren't encouraging because I was from Milwaukee-Downer, but I always liked Mr. Roelofs, Vernon Roelofs. I remember Constitutional History and I remember he used to say at the time, "If you're conservative now, you'll be much more conservative when you're older." Because when we were going to school, it was the '60s, so there were conservatives but then liberals, and I remember him commenting on that. I remember him walking across campus without a coat. He would just saunter across in the dead of winter with his tweed jacket, never wore a coat, with his pipe. But he invited his class to dinner. William Chaney was fabulous. I was scared of him, but he was such a good lecturer, that was amazing. I remember Mr. Tjossem for English. He was a little scary, didn't like him. Well, I thought he was rude, pompous. But I loved Mr. Read for geology. Mr. Breunig, and I know he passed away. Ronald Mason, for my senior year, I took a lot of anthropology. And in fact when I graduated I went to the Neville Public Museum in Green Bay, Wisconsin for two years, and Mr. Mason would come up with his wife who wasn't on the faculty then. I think she was adjunct professor at UW-M at the time, or one of the campuses. And they came up because they had some of their archaeological specimens stored at the museum. I ended up getting a master's degree in anthropology from the University of Oklahoma, because Joseph Whitecotton who had been here went down there and somebody said it was a good, small department. But good experiences with Mr. Mason, Mr. Read. We called everybody "mister." I don't know what they do today. That was kind of modeled after Harvard, I think, where it wasn't "doctor," it was "mister." Those are the ones that I remember, but very nice. There was another geology teacher that I had, but I can't remember. But Read, Mason, Roelofs, Chaney. I didn't remember Mr. Goldgar for English, I remember Mr. Tjossem, but I must have had somebody else for English as well. But some nice experiences, good classes, even though I missed out on Freshman Studies. That's too bad, I missed that. But good teachers, and I loved the campus, because it's a community. That's worthwhile, that's what I had at Milwaukee-Downer, and that idea stayed the same. That's what I wanted from a college. That's very important, I think.

JS: Well, we're out of time. Is there anything else you would like to say or add?

JM: No, I think that's it.

[End: 00:22:31]