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ORAL HISTORY

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Clay B. Kimball
Interviewer

Address:

S. A. U. E

Date:

5/23/91

Helen Thiesman
Interviewee

Address:

P.O. Box 231
Edwardsville, Il

Date:

5/23/91

62025

Date of Accession: _____

SIUE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Summers 1990-91

Helen Philabaun Interview, May 23, 1991

Interviewed by Stanley B. Kimball

Filename: PHILABAUN. 523

NOTE: The interviewee declined to edit this interview.

Q: Thank you so much for coming by Helen Philabaun on this lovely May the 23rd. Thanks for being part of this oral history project. Now you came here in 1962. Twenty-nine years ago. You retired just last year so you've had a lot of experience. Why did you come here in the first place?

A: Well for economic reasons.

Q: You needed a job.

A: That's right.

Q: Well most of us did.

A: My husband was an ex-prisoner of war and he had spells of illness and it just became obvious to me that he was a truck driver and so if he didn't work there was no money and so I just thought I was close to the University and I would just go see if they were hiring. So I came out and I took a test.

Q: You were living in Edwardsville I take it.

A: Edwardsville. We had moved here in 1957 and then we had our youngest son who is now 31 years old and he was three when I came to work.

Q: You took a Civil Service exam?

A: Right. And I interviewed for one job at the library and I didn't get that one. I decided it was because I dressed up too much, but I was from the old school where you wore gloves and heels and presented yourself as a lady. Not that I think that that was the reason they didn't, but I think the library had a little bit different tone and besides I think they already had somebody else in mind which was the way things worked then. And so I went home and in the mean time I decided I really didn't want to go back to work and leave my little three year old so. But then Sharon Ott in personnel called me for an interview and I said well I didn't know if I really wanted to go back to work and she said to me well you could come out and interview. Don't be so conceited. They might not hire you. So I thought oh there's some merit to that. So I came and it was in the office in the Dean of Instruction for Bruce Thomas.

Q: Walk us through, Helen, the various positions and offices you have held and worked in since beginning in 1962.

A: I was a clerk typist class II and the title of department was General Instruction then.

Q: All right than where did you go?

A: Well I stayed in Instruction and in the Academic Affairs area. The names of the offices changed. Like the change from General Instruction to Academic Affairs. McVickar was then vice president but we were not in the vice president's office per se. We were in another office, but we did all of the contract appointments and all of the work, the record work and the processing of all the appointments and, oh gosh what all did we do, the budget. And then from the Academic Affairs it was changed to the Provost Office.

I stayed in the Provost Office until Dr. Beard became Director of University Personnel Services. That was about 1978-79.

Q: Then did you go from the Provost Office to Personnel?

A: We stayed in the Provost Office for a year before we moved down to Personnel. Then they decided to put all of the personnel functions under one head and Dr. Beard became that head.

I was promoted from a chief clerk to an administrative clerk on June 1st, 1968.

I was an administrative clerk until December 1st of 1970 when I became an Administrative Aid and I was an administrative aid until - I was made a Personnel Officer III in, I think it was 1984. That's where I stayed until I retired.

Q: . Twenty-nine years in Academic Affairs, Provost Office, and Personnel.

A: . But all of this time my work was directly connected to the academic area.

Q: Why have you stayed here so long?

A: Well because I thought it was a good place to work and in addition to that I always wanted to go to college and I just never did and to me it was a good substitute. I could be in the academic area and I associated with all levels of administration, all kinds of people from civil service to faculty members to administrative staff and I thought that that was a pretty satisfying job.

Q: Was it possible for you to take some courses on campus?

A: I tried a couple of times but I always felt like the nature of my work and the work load was almost too much for me to do that satisfactorily with a three, well at the time I started it was three years old. Of course there weren't any classes here on campus until 1965 and we did so, there were so few people in the office and we did so many jobs. Like we did all of the salary increases. I did the salary increases. We did the budget. We did all the sabbatical leaves, all of the appointments, so many of the interviews and there were so details to be taken care of. All of the sabbaticals...you know all of the leaves without pay. There were just so many jobs that were centered in that one local.

Q: Now this one local, was that a tract house here where the University is now?

A: At the beginning. Um-hmm. We started out where the University Police are housed now .

Q: So you lived in Edwardsville and apparently you did not work in Alton or East St. Louis.

A: No. I did not.

Q: You're one of the few who's entire career was at Edwardsville.

A: Oh, really?

Q: You referred to tract houses and started to talk about the three vice presidents...

A: Right.

Q: We irreverently called them the three stooges.

A: Right. Okay.

Q: Now I hope it was affectionately. Let's see there was Bruce Thomas.

A: Well now that was under McVickar who was the vice president for Academic Affairs. You see those were all assistants to the vice president.

Q: Well are you talking about the three of which Bruce Thomas was one or are you talking about three other people?

A: I'm talking about the three vice presidents. See Delyte Morris appointed Robert McVickar as vice president, Ruffner as vice president, John Rendleman as vice president. McVickar was Academic Affairs. Ruffner was Area Services.

Q: When I talked about the three stooges, I was not talking at the McVickar, Ruffner, Rendleman level.

A: I understand that.

Q: I was talking affectionately at the Bruce Thomas level.

A: Right. Okay.

Q: So now you were saying McVickar and Ruffner and Rendleman.

A: Right. Now those are the vice president's.

Q: All right.

A: Then each vice president of course had his assistants too or whatever title they deemed to designate for their staff.

Jim Brown, Bruce Thomas, and Lawrence MacAnany were all assistants to the vice president.

Q: In these three basic areas in which you have spent your career here what would you feel were your greatest accomplishments or achievements? Things that made you feel good about your work.

A: I think being able to help. I want to say faculty members, but it would have been anybody. As a rule faculty members teach their courses. They serve on their committees. They do what's expected of them and many do much more, but when it comes time to some of the benefits that they're supposed to be able to avail themselves of, they don't know all the rules. And so I always felt it a real contribution to be able to tell them what they could expect to do and what they were entitled to, at least was available to them. Maybe not what was entitled to them. That's not a good term, but what was available and what kinds of things they could be looking for to help their academic careers.

Q: I was one. I am perhaps an architypical faculty member who is always in need of a big sister and so in the most positive affectionate way possible I refer to people like you as big sisters.

A: It was my pleasure. I think in an office such as the Provost where I worked for so many years and in seeing all of the papers for the whole University come across my desk it was easy to pick up trends. To me it always seemed that the rules, the guidelines were there. The policies were there and that if they were there, they were there for everybody and everybody should be able at least to seek them out and find out what the rules were.

Q: Anything else you would care to add as to your personal satisfaction and achievements along these lines?

A: I felt like it was a lot of satisfaction to me to be able to grow in all the different areas because of the different duties that were assigned to the people in those kinds of offices. All of the kinds of situations that we were exposed to, good ones and bad ones, and there were lots of both.

Q: Do you have anything to add to either contributions or satisfactions?

A: Since I was more or less a staff and support person to usually an assistant vice president or to the provost, I guess the most significant satisfaction was being able to deliver answers to questions when they were needed.

Q: As a resource person.

A: Right.

Q: Well...

A: The sick leave was a mess and so I did have to straighten that out. I did it. I won't say I was willing inside. I mean I really wasn't very happy about having to do it because I felt that when I started that it was in 1974-75. The job should have been in the Personnel Office, but that was one of the things we were told to do so we did it. We got it to where it belonged. It fell in the Office of the Provost, the responsibility did.

Q: Now you remind me of something. You said a moment ago that the sick leave records were a mess.

A: Right.

Q: Another person I interviewed said something fascinating but later edited it out. This was in reference not to sick leave, but medical, the health services, a somewhat related activity. This person called Health Services the snake pit of the University. Implying I presume that at times that office needed a little organization and a little structuring.

Q: Okay now let us flip this coin over. You have waxed eloquently on significant contributions and satisfactions. What have been your frustrations around here?

A: To my way of thinking improvements could not be done or new ideas instituted because of politics. You had to go through channels. There were committees for this and committees for that and so forth. It was not easy to go ahead and do things just because you thought it was a good idea. Does that make sense to you?

Q: Regrettably, yes.

Q: Internal politics or internal policies have at times frustrated you. What else?

A: Oh, what else? Well I wasn't an easily frustrated person because usually I guess I've either found ways to work around and get, or else I could explain to people why things didn't work. Gosh let me think. What was frustrating?

Q: Let's talk about best pleasant memories.

A: Best pleasant memories. Well I can remember in order to get the budgets in order, you know they had to start very early asking or including recommendations or asking for new positions. Justifying them and there was a lot of overtime and of course then we didn't get paid for it. We got compensating time off, but the thing of it was - the administrators - no matter how lofty their title or how lofty their positions were all willing to roll up their shirt sleeves and help everybody and get the job done.

It didn't make any difference what needed to be done; they were willing to do it. That was a happy memory because I thought it was very unique. You know they didn't expect the civil service to do it all or the administrative staff. They, regardless of whether it was budget, whether it was oh the catalogs, or the class schedules everybody was always willing to help.

Q: Back to the pleasant memories.

A: Let's see. Oh, gosh. Pleasant memory. It was a nice place to work even though we were in tract houses. The people were all nice. You mean specific memories though?

Q: If you...

A: I can remember the thrill of classes opening. I can remember the - in 1965 after we had been here...

Q: September of '65.

A: Right. -for three years. I remember the first cafeteria which was in the basement of the library.

Q: Um-hmm.

A: That was an experience. Let me see. What else? In the springtime...

Q: You must of watched the campus grow right up out of the cornfields.

A: We did. Right. Right. In fact one time when they were building - I believe it was Peck building during our lunch hour and all of the sudden we heard a pounding on the front door and in comes this kid that was all out of breath and said that there had been an accident out there. Our lights had gone out. Our typewriters had gone off. This kid came up and said there's been an accident apparently the boom on one of the cranes had hit what they had thought was the telephone line and it wasn't a telephone line. It was an electric line and two men were electrocuted. I can remember Art Grist and tried to administer mouth to mouth resuscitation but they were already gone.

Q: Any more best memories?

A: Oh, I can remember the Honors Day Programs. Sometimes we were called on, Ruth Heepke and I and Julia Mopen (sp unclear) were asked to serve and that was a pleasant experience. We had lots of good times in our office. It was a small office then. Everybody was so, what should I say, collegial.

Q: Let's move right into the bad, worst memory category.

A: Well I would say that one was bad.

Q: All right the electrocutions.

A: Another one would have been. This is a strange one to think about I think but when Clarence Stevens was vice president for operations and then when they moved the three vice presidents in and gave them each one of their titles, of course Mr. Stevens' job was no longer there and I can remember seeing that tall lanky man walk out of that office by himself and I thought that was kind of a sad thing to think that he had really done everything to get this campus started and here he was. He had given so much of his time. To me there he was walking out of the office on his last day by himself. That seemed kind of sad to me.

Q: He returned to academics didn't he?

A: He went to Carbondale as I recall and he was in and out. I would call him one of the statesman of the University.

A: One was when Bruce Thomas left in 1968 or '69 and John Rendleman was vice president then and Bruce Thomason and John Rendleman didn't see eye to eye and so Mr. Thomas just got out and scouted out a new job and he went to (word unclear) State University. So that was one of my worst memories too. Another one was when Virgil Seymore died. That was a sad thing because he was a different kind of man. A lot of people didn't really like him. I won't say they didn't like him, but they didn't really like his administrative style.

He was assistant to the vice president for operations. When Dean Going went back to instruction, that wasn't very happy and that was because he and Dr. McVickar just didn't see eye to eye either.

That was a very, very sad thing to me because Dr. Going is a perfect, perfect gentleman. He was kind. He was perceptive. He, oh, he was just a beautiful person. And Dr. McVickar was a good academician, but he was a very different kind of person. He wasn't as gentle I would say as Dr. Going. It was a sad thing. It was also sad when Julia Mopen left our office. She was ill and just couldn't come back .

Q: What are some of your humorous experiences around here?

A: Let's see. What was - what were some of our humorous... I guess I was always kind of a serious person. I'm not sure if I saw the humor in many things. Humorous. I'd have to think about that one too.

Well that was another sad one was when Andy Kochman left because I felt like he was another one who had given so much of his life, I mean his academic life. He really had been a dedicated university servant and simply because somebody else did not think that he was that kind of person or at least didn't see his service in that light. He was not even included as one of the final three recommendations to serve, you know to be considered for president. That hurt him too.

Q: In any of your three major fields of operation around here, were you ever involved in what we would call community relations, community service?

A: Community relations. I don't know if this is a service, but we used to give the Chamber of Commerce a list of all new faculty members so that they could invite them to teas. Well that was always a big one because you had to have a certain amount of biographical information for them.

A: Well we had grievances and things like that.

Q: All right.

A: There was lots of work. We had one faculty member who I think was not promoted and there was a huge lot of work to be done.

Q: In your work at the Office of Personnel what were the big types of problems that were continually dumped on your desks, like tenure, promotion, and grievances?

A: We had to deal with responding to grievances, responding to outside agencies when faculty members were discriminated against. We had a couple of faculty members who felt they had been discriminated against. They were in not a true academic unit of the University or at least what was always considered as I was growing up in the University an academic unit. They were in East St. Louis. Shortly after I came here, President Morris established the Experiment in Higher Education. That sort of drifted for a number of years until Mr. Kochman became vice president/provost. These people in East St. Louis were teaching and it was decided that they would report to or be put under the School of Education.

When they were put under the School of Education, they were all given academic rank on term basis, but the tenure policy then said that after five years of service an instructor would either be notified that he was going to get tenure or that he was going to be - or she - was going to be terminated the year after.

So there were a number of tenure decisions that were given to some of these people as instructors. Then sometime later they moved the whole unit, took it out of education and put it back down in East St. Louis under University Services.

Q: Can you mention three outstanding or unusual problems that hit Personnel?

A: Well there were two from that unit. There was one from the School of Business. I don't remember if that was a discrimination, race discrimination or promotion, maybe tenure.

There was a female faculty member in the School of Science who felt that she had been discriminated against and it was quite a lot of work and I think that was in the newspapers. There were tenure problems.

Q: Well would it be fair to say that the Personnel Office had more than it's share of hot potatoes and problems to solve?

A: I don't know if they had more than it's share. No. I don't think so. Most of the things that happened were at a time when women faculty members, I mean the women's movement, and so I think a lot of the women were feeling their oats so to speak and it was the first time they had opportunity to really be heard and see results or at least test situations to see if there were results. So I don't know if we had more than our share but there were a lot of them.

Q: Would you call the Personnel Office, because of the human problems that come, would you call it a difficult place to work?

A: I think it's a very thankless place to work because most of the things you get here are the things that don't work out. The things that do work out, they're taken for granted. So I think it's just like anything else. When things don't work out for people, they're very unhappy even though maybe the results were based on a fair consideration. I think Personnel does a good job of trying at least to be fair, but they have to go by rules too. The way I've always seen Personnel is, it's kind of out here all by itself because the administration, the higher administrators expected certain things

done. The people expect things done and here's this group of people who are also employees of the University and they're supposed to please everybody and it's an almost impossible task.

Q: Whatever our various missions as a University have been and in your experience here, how successfully have we been in making contributions to our area of southwestern Illinois?

A: I think that the contributions that this University has made is incalculable. Opportunities for people. It's raised the standard of living for so many people. In just my case alone I feel like it provided us with a really stable lifestyle because I was able to have steady employment. It helped my youngest son to go to college. It helped my other two boys.

I think it has made Edwardsville not quite such a cliquish place. It's broadened their views.

Q: I felt that the city was divided in its loyalty towards us and sometimes we weren't appreciated. So that's comforting to hear you say that we have helped them too.

A: Well I'm sure that they wouldn't all agree with it and I think that some of the, I'm gonna say old timers, I think it was kind of hard and probably it's still sort of hard for them to come around to acknowledge that it's increased the value of farmland. It's provided, oh, I can't, I feel that lots of times they sort of bad mouth the University but they profited by it whether they like to admit it or not. They have.

Q: I know studies have been made showing the enormous economic impact of this University on this area.

Have you thought of some things that we have touched on before or maybe not touched on at all that you would care to record?

A: Well when you said about humorous things - I don't know if everybody would think this was humorous, but to me it was humorous because when I started at this university, my starting salary was \$250. I had previously worked for Clark's Insurance Agency in East St. Louis and I made considerably more than that there, but since it was close to home I started for three months and then I decided I'd work another three months.

Well at the end of six months I had to decide whether I wanted to be permanent or just leave and I decided that since it was so close to home and everybody was so nice and considerate that I would like to continue working. Well we had our, I think maybe it was the second civil service ladies' dinner that they had had and I can remember one of the secretaries and she happened to be from the Humanities division at that time, came up to me and since I started in the Vice President and Provost Office she came up to me and she says to me, Helen how does it feel to start at the top? because I was in the Provost or in the Vice President's Office. I looked at her. I hardly knew what to say because all the time I was thinking \$250 a month. If this is the top I'd certainly hate to see the bottom. That did amuse me.

I can't think of anything really funny. Oh, I can remember one thing. When we worked over in the tract house where the University Police are housed now, - purchasing where I was assistant to Mr.

Stevens who was the vice president for operations and it snowed and snowed and so Hugh Barnett, if I can use a name, I hope that's all right - whom I dearly love was groundsman. Well he always shoveled off the snow to the Vice President's Office. Well this particular day he came there was a back entrance and a front entrance and of course all of the visitors and all of the administrators walked in the front door. Well this particular day the civil service people were the first there....

Virgil Seymore was assistant to Mr. Stevens who was vice president for operations and he always liked to come in the front door. Well this particular day Hugh Barnett shoveled the walk to the back door and Mr. Seymore came out and said to him or made a remark of some sort that he thought that the front walk should be shoveled. Mr. Seymore drove up. Mr. Seymore didn't have a doctorate by the way. Anyway he drove up and indicated that Hugh Barnett should have shoveled the walk to the front door. But Hugh was shoveling the walk to the back door so he said, well, I'm sorry Mr. Seymore. If you want in your office today, I guess you'll just have to go in the back door. So he just shoveled the walk to the back door. That was kind of humorous because nobody ever, what should I say, challenged Mr. Seymore. I mean he was the assistant to the vice president.

Q: If I could interview just two other people who would you recommend?

A: I would so Ruth Heepke and Helen Morrow. Ruth just retired, she was Administrative Secretary to Gene Magak . And do you have down Florence Gillig?

She started with Ila Steel, started in 1963, she started out in the library.

Q: Anything else now as we bring it to a close, Helen? Anything else on any topic addressed or unaddressed you wish to share with us?

A: No I think it was a privilege.

Q: Well let me say, Helen, thanks then for these unusual views. So, Helen, formally thanks.

Index

A

Academic Affairs, 3

B

Beard, Earl, 3

Brown, James, 6

C

Chamber of Commerce, 14

Civil Service, 2, 18

D

Death of workers, 11

E

Edwardsville, 1, passim

Experiment in Higher Ed., 15

G

General Instruction, 2

Going Wm., 13

Grievances, 15, 16

H

Health Service, 9

Heepke, Ruth, 12, 19

K

Kochman, Andy, 14

M

MacAnany, Larry, 6

MacVicar, Robert, 3, 5, 6, 13

Mopen, Julia, 12

Morris, Delyte, 6, 15

Morrow, Helen, 19

O

Ott, Sharon, 2

P

Personnel Office, 3, passim

Provost Office, 3, passim

R

Rendleman, John, 13

Ruffner, Ralph, 6

S

Seymour, Virgil, 19

Stevens, Clarence, 12, 19

T

Thomas, Bruce, 2, 5, 13

U

University politics, 9