

**PATRICIA FAIRFIELD ARTMAN ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: Clara A. Ridder

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Fairfield-Artman

DATE: August 5, 2004

[Begin CD 1]

PFA: Let me just start this: This is a narrative collected from Dr. Clara Ridder on Thursday, August 5, 2004.

CR: So, where do we start?

PFA: Okay, basically the only kind of question I really have is just kind of talk about your life work or, you know, just where we started. You hadn't taught for twenty-five years. That's, that's interesting.

CR: I grew up in Nebraska on a ranch. My father raised Hereford cattle and registered Herefords and I'm one of eleven children; I'm number ten in the family. And I graduated from high school in 1929 and in those days, you could get three-year certificates to teach. So I taught rural school for three years. The pay was not as much as you get a day now, you know—

PFA: [chuckles]

CR: —but anyway, it was quite an experience. I really have great admiration for people who teach in the grades but I think, that instead of having so much specialization, it isn't a bad idea to have all eight grades in one room—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —my students learned a great deal—

PFA: So you had a one-room classroom?

CR: One-room classroom—

PFA: Okay.

CR: —and they helped each other, and they were quiet. We got a lot of books every, every

two months, every month from Lincoln and when I hear about people that can't read, so I think about the students that I had and—

PFA: Do you remember the year you started teaching?

CR: 1930.

PFA: '30, wow!

CR: I taught '29, '30, '31, '32 and then I went to the University of Nebraska for four years and I worked all the time. Sometimes I had two jobs. This is during the [Great] Depression—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —nobody had any money—

PFA: Right.

CR: —not only, not only was, we not only had a drought, but we had a depression at the same time. It was a ghastly time. Anybody that hasn't gone through that deep Depression that we had, has no idea what it was like—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and then I graduated in '36, I wouldn't take education because I didn't want to teach in high school. I'd rather teach third and fourth-graders any day—

PFA: [laughs]

CR: They think the teacher is wonderful, you know.

PFA: Yeah. [laughs]

CR: Then—If you want to talk about women that were wonderful, the dean at Nebraska, her name was Feddy(?), Dean Feddy decided that I should take a scholarship and work on master's degree right away and I told her I didn't have any money. She said, "It'll pay enough." Paid \$40 a month and I lived on that for two years—

PFA: Wow!

CR: —you know. And I was in nutrition and chemistry and I mean to tell you that we used to take showers to stay awake because we were working so hard. And it was assumed that you got A's, you know. And we worked in a rat lab. Those were the toughest two years I ever put in and when I got out of there, I went back to Nebraska and became home demonstration agent in Western County in Nebraska and it was interesting. A lot of those

home demonstration agents kept talking about how hard they worked and I thought they don't even know what hard work is. They ought to try that master's study.

PFA: [laughs]

CR: —in a rat lab and trying, you know—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —trying to live on nothing. Anyway, after two years, I went to New Mexico and worked and taught at New Mexico State College and then when the [Second World] War broke out, I was going to Denver and was in the head of the—what they called executive secretary of the Colorado Nutrition Council and we had great fun. There were a lot of important executives that were on the Council. We had a meeting once a week, once a month in my house—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and I served them dinner, you know. We were all friends and we got along fine and we became one of the councils, that were cited. We did accomplish a lot but it was, it was through cooperation mostly. And when the war ended, I went with the Servel, they came and got me. I don't know who, they heard my name but anyway, and I went with Servel! and it was in Evansville, Indiana. Refrigerator manufacturer—

PFA: Oh.

CR: —and they also had water heaters. Seemed like they had something else too. Oh, air conditioning. [coughs] When I quit there, I went to Cornell [University] and worked on my doctorate. And by that time, I decided to work in design and actually—When I was at the University of Nebraska I went to the dean of architecture and told him I'd like to major in architecture. He said, "We don't take women. We can't, we can't find jobs for men, what would we do with you?"

PFA: [snorts]

CR: [chuckles] You know. I said, "I'd be willing to make draperies if you put me in design. No, no, no, we can't take women." That was it, you know?

PFA: Yes.

CR: So when I went to Cornell, I decided I would in some—I was going to work on some architectural design. And I went down and talked to the dean and he said, "We have thirty-six students coming in as freshmen, we have about 300 applications, there's not a chance in the world of you getting in." I said, "Could I just have my, you know, if they could just look it, could you give me a critique? That's all I ask." He said, "Well, go ask

the instructor." He got tired of talking to me—

PFA: [laughs]

CR: —So I told the instructor that the dean said that I should ask you. You know how that works?

PFA: Yes.

CR: He was trying to fix the blind. You know, he was so irritated and finally he said, "You know, you can't have a seat in there?" And I said, "I realize that, but all I want is somebody to critique my album."

PFA: Yes.

CR: —I'll do the work on my own." He said, "You going to do that all semester?" And I said, "Somebody will drop out."

PFA: [laughs]

CR: —and you know, after about four or five weeks somebody dropped out—

PFA: I'll be darned.

CR: —and I was in—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and they had a rule, they had to cover up the name so that nobody, when they gave me grades, nobody knew who it was—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and I was always at the top of the class. And, you know, they, the dean and the instructor who just assumed that it wasn't me—

PFA: [laughs]

CR: —that always amused me, you know, sort of. But anyhow, I got, I got architectural design finally and then I, at Cornell, they have the idea that if you breathe that air, you become learned. Haven't you ever heard that about schools?

PFA: Yeah, I've heard that, yeah.

CR: Well, I think it's true about Cornell too—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and if you haven't had it at Cornell, you probably haven't had it but if you had it at Cornell, you know—

PFA: [laughs]

CR: —so as far as the requirements were concerned, it was sort of like up to my committee because, after all, I was breathing that air. I decided that I would work on, in design but housing design was really not ready to give a PhD although they said they were, but I said, "You know, I just don't have time for you, five or six years, to work on this program. I'll have to go down and into management." So I went down into management and worked [unclear] area and did a study on kitchens—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —in Ithaca County, Ithaca—But anyway, some county up there—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —did 100 different kitchens and asked people where they stored things from where they used them and the distances, you know—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —well, anyway, I figured out a way to condense the material—

PFA: Right.

CR: —that's what I'm saying to you, you know?

PFA: Yes.

CR: —so that when I got, I spent quite a few weeks on that. So that when I got the material. I could put it together—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and that was, that was put into a bulletin. It's a Cornell bulletin to this day. Then, I taught at Florida State and Arkansas. At Arkansas, I did a study on chairs. Actually, the, the Department of Agriculture, I guess, decided that they could do a study on living rooms, something about people that need to use their living rooms for extra living or something or other—

PFA: Yeah.

CR: —and they told me that I could probably get a grant with that area. And I thought, "I'm not going to do some vague nothing study." So I said, "How about if I just do chairs?"

PFA: Yes.

CR: So then I did a study, I had an experimental chair that I designed. It had a whole bunch of little springs at the bottom and at the back. And it would, would—It could go at any kind of an angle and you could lock everything—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and you could measure how deep everything was and put the stuff on cards and try to put it together and I did it for different kinds of sitting. You know, like to sit and read, to sit and work at a desk, to sit and relax—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —anyway, it was—It was a headache kind of a project, but I got it together and that became a bulletin. And that's what, when I came here—I came mainly because this is the furniture center of the world, you know.

PFA: Yes.

CR: But [coughs] somehow or other, I didn't get any money for research here. I thought that I was going to when I came, but I don't want to go into the reasons why it didn't happen—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —but I did have five or six graduate students to start with and then I got, they gave me a senior course and I went down to the head of the department and I said, "Those students are not learning anything—

PFA: Oh!

CR: —I'm sorry to tell you that I don't think our seniors who are graduating are really great" and the head, she said, "You mustn't say that about our students."

PFA: This is at UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro]?

CR: [unclear]

PFA: Ah!

CR: I said, "Well, it's all right. Would you rather have them go out without knowing anything? You think people are not going know this is true?" You know?

PFA: Yes.

CR: So they decided: Well, okay, it was probably my attitude. She said, "You write some courses and we'll change it." And the result was, there was one other girl, woman, that was in there that was in that area sort of and she had a lot of bracelets and talked about wearing a hat and gloves and being a lady. But she didn't know anything about design. [chuckles]

And it, it, it, it was really an awful lot of work and I—I wrote for materials and I was told I was using up the postage allowance and I asked for—for twenty desks, for drawing desks and they said they don't have that in the budget and I said, "Could we get two a year and in ten years, you know?"

PFA: Yes.

CR: So they got me, they got twenty and we started out. And those, those courses were seven hours of lab a week and that was fourteen hours of lab that I had in addition to my graduate students. I mean to tell you, I was loaded down—

PFA: Yes. Do you remember the year that came here?

CR: I came in '59.

PFA: Okay.

CR: I came in the fall of '59 and I retired in '78.

PFA: Right.

CR: That was the way, that was the start, that's the story of my life. A lot of graduate students, we did a lot of work—

PFA: Yes, yes.

CR: One girl did a book on pottery. One of them did something on weaving. We had a lot of, of fun, it was, it was really very interesting. I loved the students.

PFA: Yeah, yeah. Did you live on campus at the time?

CR: Live on campus?

PFA: Yes. They had so me, I understand, some faculty lived in the dorms then?

CR: Oh, if they lived in the dorms, I think they must have been supervisors—

PFA: Yes, yeah.

CR: No, no.

PFA: Yeah, okay.

CR: I had enough of a load without that. [chuckles]

PFA: Really, yeah.

CR: [coughs] So that's my life and that's what I did.

PFA: Okay. Do you remember when, when it was changing over from Woman's College to—?

CR: It seemed to me like it was changing when I first came. I said, "I would bet that in four or five years, this will be a co-ed school." And it was.

PFA: Yes. Do you remember who the chancellor was at the time?

CR: I told you, I wouldn't remember any names.

PFA: Yeah, that's right. I think [Otis] Singletary was chancellor.

CR: Singletary was chancellor. I don't know whether it was when I came or if that was later. I don't know.

PFA: Yes, yes. That's very interesting. So an interesting life, yes, were there many female faculty at the time you came?

CR: Oh, I think there were mostly female when I came. There were very few men, but then, the men, just as soon as it became co-educational, the men took over. And you probably heard about Mereb Mossman [dean of instruction, dean of the college, dean of faculty, vice-chancellor for academic affairs].

PFA: Yes, yeah.

CR: Mossman? She did like what five or six people would do—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —she had lot of control, lot of power, but was dedicated and worked awfully hard—

PFA: Yes. Her, her, she was the dean?



CR: She was, she was, no, maybe a dean. I don't know what her title was—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —she was in administration.

PFA: Okay.

CR: Probably a vice-chairman or something. I don't know what her title was.

PFA: Right.

CR: In those days, everything was very scarce. There was one phone, like for three, for the whole floor—

PFA: Wow!

CR: —it was out in the hall some place. And there was no money for supplies. There was no money for anything, you know?

PFA: Yes.

CR: Budgets were very, very tight. And I suppose Woman's College had a tighter budget than the co-educational schools, I don't know.

PFA: Yes.

CR: I think, I think they still have trouble with the budget.

PFA: The state, of course, is always putting the clamps on it.

[recording paused]

CR: Woman's College—when the men came in, when the men came in, they took over all administrative jobs—

PFA: Yes

CR: —and now, of course, we have a woman chancellor [Patricia Sullivan].

PFA: Yes.

CR: But, a lot of men came in to home economics in those days too. And they were, they

were favored. They were greatly admired because they were men, you know?

PFA: I remember the cafeteria in the Stone Building. The Home Ec Building? Is that the building you taught in?

CR: Yes.

PFA: Yeah. And you were the department—you taught in was the—

CR: I think it was called housing. And I don't know, if it is housing and interiors, something like that.

PFA: Yes.

CR: I'm not sure what it was called. I know when I said, I got this one senior class and I said to them, I said, "Let's, let's have a little project. Let's design this" and when the stuff came in, I said, "I wouldn't take this from freshmen." You know?

PFA: Yes.

CR: I couldn't believe it, it was of such poor caliber—and when I said that, the faculty said, "Well, we think that our people should teach the design" I said, "If you think that, they should have the program."

PFA: Yes.

CR: And you know, they thought I was terribly harsh. They shouldn't have to say things to get them to move—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —it's impossible. But now they have what six architects. [laughs] They've, they've, they've to a big program now.

PFA: Oh yeah. You were one of the pioneers in the program! That's—

CR: It was tough.

PFA: Was it? Yeah.

CR: But the students were wonderful—

PFA: Yes.

CR: Students make up for everything.

PFA: Yeah, many—When someone tells me that all the female students were called, "miss," never called them by their first name.

CR: That was in the old days.

PFA: Yeah.

CR: I really had not much connection because everybody was very cultured and the, the, the students were supposed to—I think they were supposed to go to chapel or something, but they had, they dressed for dinner. Oh, that was not in my time—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —that, that, that was over with before I came—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —but one thing that happened that made me smile: One time I saw what a faculty had used for recommendation for a student, she said, "She comes from a good family." And I thought, "Does this mean she is smart—?"

PFA: [chuckles]

CR: —or that she learned something?" You know?

PFA: Yes.

CR: Good family was everything and people would say to me things like, "Oh, we had, we had petticoats and we had special suitcases for petticoats." What difference does it make, you know?

PFA: [chuckles] Yeah.

CR: I don't know, I don't think, are you a born and bred Southerner?

PFA: No, New York

CR: Well, you know, you haven't run in to very many Southerners either because most of them are gone—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —they're like me, somebody that came from outside.

PFA: Yes. Was there cooperation among the faculty? Did you find in your department—?

CR: Oh, I think so, yes. We were all friends and I think—I think that cafeteria made a lot of difference too—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —because, you know, that's where you got to know people, other departments and other staff and a lot of other schools came over to eat in that cafeteria, they had just lunch—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —it was a wonderful lunch. They had good food and it was very popular. It is such a shame that they didn't keep that up.

PFA: Right. Do get on campus very often?

CR: Well, about once a year. I go to that, when they, when they ask us back for faculty lunch or whatever it is in our area.

PFA: Yes.

CR: I don't go back otherwise because I am legally blind, and I can't drive.

PFA: Yes, okay.

CR: Makes a lot of difference. I learned to drive when I was about fifteen on that ranch in Nebraska. When they took that car away, it was—That's been about ten years, so I'm used to it now. [chuckles]

PFA: Right.

[recording paused]

CR: He became a dentist and his expenses were paid, I did not ask my father for anything because it was such a tough time and I knew that it was just too much to ask. You can't believe how, corn, everything was so cheap and there wasn't anything.

PFA: Yes.

CR: There was no crops, nothing in the pastures, nothing grew, and you had to feed the cattle. You took the cattle to the sandhills. I just didn't ask and I saved \$1,200, which was a lot of money in those days. And I got through those four years on that plus working. And

there wasn't—I could do whatever I wanted to. Nobody protested my going but it was sort of understood that you're on your own, you know?

PFA: Yes.

CR: But I didn't ask Dad either. It was—I felt so sorry for my father. All that responsibility. He had a lot of land, a lot of cattle, no feed, no prices and every year the same thing: drought and depression.

PFA: Yes.

CR: Awful time. I did some design work. I did a lot of design work for doctors and for lawyers in town. Then mostly by word of mouth. I'd work for one, they'd tell each other, you know. But that was kind of fun, yeah.

[recording paused]

CR: The women were squealing— [makes squeal noises]

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and I thought, "What is it in this Woman's College?" But Southern women have a tendency to raise their voice and—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and to exclaim over things, you know. And there were a lot of those around but actually most of the faculty, I think, were really, were really quite good—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and they knew their business and they were dedicated. We had good math department. good English department, you know. It was considered to be a good school. I still think UNCG is better to send your kids to than [University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill because Chapel Hill is so big—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and, of course, this is getting pretty big too.

PFA: Yes.

CR: But I had, I had some next-door neighbors that have children that went to Chapel Hill and

they'd come back almost crying because they didn't belong to a clique or something and were left out—

PFA: Yes.

CR: I think it's easier to get friends in a smaller school—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and you get a lot more attention from your professors too.

PFA: Yes.

CR: Professors in a school like Chapel Hill have a tendency to have assistants and they're the ones that grade the papers and probably do most of the teaching—

PFA: Yes, yeah. Do you remember how many students there were? You said you had four graduate students, you taught undergraduate classes, or you re-designed some of the courses?

CR: Four graduate students?

PFA: Yes. You said you had some graduate students?

CR: I had a lot of graduate students. What do you mean?

PFA: Did they have a master's program at UNCG??

CR: Yes. They had a master's program.

PFA: Okay.

CR: They still have.

PFA: Yes.

[recording paused]

CR: Yes. And then I ride the SCAT bus to the YM[CA] and I do weight machines for about a half hour and then I swim either a third or a half mile. Not terribly far, but quite a way for me—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —and then I get on the bus and come back and I'm generally home about 12:00 so it takes a good half a day to do that—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —sometimes I think I could work, I could exercise on the floor here—

PFA: [laughs]

CR: —you know, but generally you don't do it unless you have a program that you go to.

PFA: Oh yeah, yeah.

[recording paused]

CR: Then you come to class and, of course, they are flunking, and I would call over to the dormitory and I couldn't get a hold of them. But finally, they came into my office and I said to them, "Why are you in school?" And they said, "Our parents wanted us to come." I said, "You know, you could, you could have them send you some place and join a club or something. If you don't want to go to class and don't want to study, you ought to prove to them that you shouldn't be here. It's kind of expensive." [laughs] But they both dropped out. But there was absolutely no reason for them to be in school—

PFA: Yes.

CR: —their parents, you can't make, give motivation if you don't have it. I don't know why I wanted to go so bad, but I wanted to go from the beginning—so I did. I'd run into people who would say, "Well, I wanted to go to school but there was no money and I just couldn't." If you wanted to go, you could go. And if you would just go halftime—

PFA: Yes, yes.

CR: —you know, you have to decide, if you have to say, "Give me the money or I can't go." That's not determined to go—

PFA: Yes.

CR: I didn't have any money and I went and I think I learned more than most of them do because I didn't have time to fool.

PFA: Yes.

[End of Interview]