

UNCG ALUMNI ASSOCIATION ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Rena Bridgman Lupton

INTERVIEWER: Jane S. Shoaf

DATE: Circa 1972

JS: Mrs. Lupton, can you tell us how you happened to come to State Normal and Industrial School [founded in 1891, now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] and where was your home?

RL: Well, my home was in Lake Landing, Hyde County; it's Engelhard [North Carolina]. And I came here because I could get help. I had to have help, and there is [sic] not many schools that would offer it, you know? And I wrote to Dr. [Charles Duncan] McIver [founding president of the school]. And I remember when it was all over, and I came down on the train and got a cab and came up to the college. And I never will forget when I got to the steps—I didn't know one thing from the other. And I walked up the steps and entered the room, and there was Miss [Sue May] Kirkland. She was the lady principal. And she wore her uniform all the time. It was black taffeta and a black taffeta apron tied around her waist. That was her uniform. She wore it all the time. And so I went in and they wanted to know what I wanted. I said, "I want to see Dr. McIver" [pronounced with a long I sound on the "I"]. I never had heard the word "McIver" in my life. No, I said, "I want to see President McIver." And, honey, she thought I was crazy. She said, "Well, Dr. McIver is busy. You sit down." [She] said, "I'll interview you. What do you want?" And I said, "I'm getting dining work to pay for my college tuition"—well, not my tuition because I got that free by signing a contract to teach two years in North Carolina. Now in those days there were not so many women teachers anywhere around there. So it went out all right.

JS: What year was this that you came to the university?

RL: It was September 1901.

JS: And you came from what is now Engelhard?

RL: Yes.

JS: And did you tell me that your father was a farmer?

RL: That's right. And that the greatest hurricane that year before had ever swept the Atlantic Coast.

JS: So he had a hard time that year?

RL: Yes. He said, "I'll help you next year." I said, "I'm getting old. I'm eighteen." Well, I was a strong body, and I showed him my work. We lived on the farm. I never worked out in the farm. Papa never let us do that. But, anyway, I was a country girl.

JS: And you came to be trained as a teacher?

RL: That's it.

JS: That was what you wanted to do?

RL: That's it.

JS: All right. When you got to the school and after you met Miss Kirkland and she told you that you could come there as a student, were you assigned to a dormitory?

RL: Well, she said, "I will take you with friends." And so she herself walked with me up on another floor to Marea Jordan's [Class of 1911] room. And Marea was a sophomore. And so they had an extra bed in there. That was to be my room. So Marea took me under her wing and showed me around and helped me, you know? Like somebody has to do when you first go in right new. And so we were friends as long as she lived. She lived in Laurinburg [North Carolina].

JS: Oh, I see. Our history books tell us that at that time Main Building and Brick Dorm had hot water heat.

RL: Yes.

JS: Did they also have bathrooms and either electricity or gas?

RL: Wait a minute. Bathrooms clear on down the hall, clear on down the hall. In each room we had a private, just a private—not a bath. And you walked to the end of the hall. And there was a—I don't know what you call it. Maybe I'll call it a little room, and it had about six places with—for people to go in, you know, and have their bath.

JS: I see. Did you have either electric or gas lighting?

RL: Well, in the—we had electric in our rooms. But down on the end of that hall, it was gas.

JS: Were such conveniences common in the homes from which most of the students came?

RL: No, no, no. We all—just about all of us came from the country. In those days they didn't have electric lights in the country homes. We had to have lamps. Did you ever see a lamp?

JS: Kerosene lamps?

RL: Yes.

JS: Well, let me ask you this. In that day and time, how many months of public school did you have?

RL: Well, I had been to public school all my life. Country schools—just six months.

JS: Six months.

RL: Six months in the country schools.

JS: Well now, probably the quality of education varied from place to place. If you lived in the city, it may have been different from what it was in the country.

RL: Well, you see, I was altogether country.

JS: Well now, when the students came to the university—what's now the university, to State Normal then—when they came, was any attempt made to give help to the people who came from—?

RL: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Repeat that last—

JS: All right. When the students came to State Normal, was any effort made to help the ones who were deficient in certain areas of their education?

RL: No, they had to make it or lose it.

JS: Just had to do it on their own?

RL: Yes. There was nothing special. You—I can still remember our—my examination to try to get in. Well, I'll say on freshman. Write a formal letter. Well, I had never written a formal letter in all—. But if I couldn't see why, I couldn't think of it. Why couldn't I have thought of Sears and Roebuck [department store] and like that? But I didn't. I sure didn't. So I missed it.

JS: But you had not been taught that in public school?

RL: No, we sure hadn't.

JS: All right. Let's move on to the experience that you had in Brick Dormitory. Now you lived in Brick Dorm for a time?

RL: Oh, I lived in Brick Dorm all the time.

JS: I see.

RL: All the time. It was—we had that great fire in 1904.

JS: Yes, ma'am. You were in there when that fire occurred?

RL: Yes.

JS: Tell us about that.

RL: At that time—now when I used to work in the dining room, we were downstairs. All of us were on West Hall. But I was not working in the dining room then. And so I had—I was assigned a room on the top floor, the fourth floor. And the fire had started from the kitchen. And they didn't know when, just when it had started. So when they found it, they didn't know when the top was going to cave in. And they rushed us out. I had on my gown and high-top black button shoes—is what they wore then.

JS: And that's all?

RL: And then I put on an outing robe, just an ordinary outing robe that I had made.

JS: And this was in January, wasn't it?

RL: February. [Editor's note: The fire destroyed Brick Dormitory on January 20, 1904.]

JS: Well, it was very cold weather.

RL: Oh, it was cold. And we were rushed out. So we rushed out. And so—because the thing was burning. And so we stood out on the campus far away enough so there wouldn't be any danger. And I stood there and watched that thing. But others did too, until the whole thing just burned down.

JS: Did you lose all of your personal belongings?

RL: Yes.

JS: Were you reimbursed for them in any way?

RL: No, no, no, no. Not a—well, the—downtown did send up a whole bunch of used dresses. Perfectly good. But if they fit anybody. They were just nice dresses. I got one of those. And then standing out there—we didn't have flu in those days. But standing out there I took a terrible cold. And I had the grip [influenza] all year. Ever hear of the grip?

JS: I've heard my mother talk about it.

RL: Well, I had the grip. So I had to go up in the infirmary and stay six weeks. I was very sick with it.

JS: Who was the doctor, you remember?

RL: Well, wait a minute. Well, Dr. [Anna M.] Gove [campus physician, professor of hygiene, and director of the department of health] was a lady doctor. And I don't know. I reckon she was our doctor.

JS: Yes.

RL: She was the doctor there a long time.

JS: So you were sick for six weeks?

RL: So, when I got back out, I had lost out, you know, six weeks. And I never could make it all up; I'm sure, I couldn't. But, anyway, the doctor said, "You are still weak. And you are not fit to go back to school. And I'm telling you to go home and stay the rest of this year."

JS: So, you went back to Engelhard?

RL: So I went back to my mother and father's. And I stayed there until the summer. And I was offered a summer school over in another county. So I went over there and taught summer school. And then four miles away there was another village. And the committee went over there and asked me to teach the winter school. And so I did. And that was a place called Hulberton [?]. So, I taught the winter school there. And I don't know. I'd gotten in it like that.

JS: Were you in a one-teacher school?

RL: Absolutely.

JS: And you were the only teacher?

RL: Absolutely, a one-teacher school.

JS: How many students did you have?

RL: Well, I had a bunch of them. I had a bunch of them. I could say I had about—there was one time I had at least seventy or more. And they would range from—some of the little children never had been to school. Now, this was before the schools in that part of the country were graded. Have you ever heard of that?

JS: Yes, ma'am.

RL: Well, so, I—well, I don't know what I tried to say. I went—

JS: You were telling me about all the different kinds of students you had when you taught in [unclear].

RL: Well, I had—as I said I had those little fellows never had been to school. And I had two up in high high school—in the top grades of high school. And so I had to teach them too. And the only way in this world it was just one big, old room. And the only way I could do—we had a morning recess and we had an afternoon recess. You know what that means?

JS: Yes, ma'am.

RL: And then a dinner hour. And so as soon as we would come in after recess, I would give those little children a lesson, a private lesson. And as soon as they got through with them, I sent them outside because there wasn't anything—I couldn't do anything to give them any kind of work. I couldn't. There was no time. I couldn't do it. Just couldn't. So I sent them outside with strict orders they were to be quiet. And in those days you minded your teachers. The committee was behind me. And they said, "Miss Rena, if the children don't learn anything, you make them mind, and if they don't mind, you whip them."

JS: I wish some of the parents would say that today.

RL: Oh, it's just reverse today, the whole thing. And so I had a perfect quietude in all of those children. Now you would not believe it. You can't teach in confusion.

JS: You certainly cannot.

RL: You cannot. And I had perfect quietude. And I really got along fine. I certainly got along fine.

JS: This was during your junior year that the fire occurred, is that right?

RL: No, no, sophomore year.

JS: So, you had finished a year and a half of your education?

RL: Well, no, I had—I think I was on my third year. Well, that's right. It was. I forgot that. It was.

JS: So you were over halfway through with your planned education?

RL: Yeah, I was.

JS: I see. Let's move on and talk a little bit about some of the buildings on the campus when you were there.

RL: Well, let's see. Now, I was in main building. They called that the Brick Dorm. That's the one you heard of.

JS: That's right. Now, which buildings were under construction while you were there?

RL: That Students' Building.

JS: Oh, yes.

RL: You remember that? That was—outside was all finished and the floors were all laid, but the partitions—the rooms had not been partitioned off.

JS: I see.

RL: And so after the fire was all over, there was nowhere to go. And so they got some kind of material and made little alcoves. And so that's where we had to stay.

JS: So, those were your rooms then?

RL: Yes.

JS: Until they could make other arrangements?

RL: Yes.

JS: I see. Our history books tell us that Dr. McIver, when they rebuilt a dormitory to take the place of Brick Dorm, wanted it not to be more than two floors high. Tell me about the morning after the fire. What arrangements were made for the students?

RL: Well, next morning, as I said, the first thing that happened was we had to have breakfast. And so they gave us a free ticket to Benbow [House] Hotel. And then Benbow Hotel gave us a free breakfast. And, now—where we got lunch from, that's vague. I don't remember ever eating anything else.

JS: Where did you get your clothes that you wore downtown to Benbow's?

RL: Borrowed them. Borrowed them from a girl in Midway [Dormitory]. And, she was a short girl. And she had a train to her dress. And the top of it should have come down here, but it came way up here on me. And so it trailed on down.

JS: But at least you had your high button shoes?

RL: I had them. I had my high button shoes.

JS: Now, I want to talk a little bit about Dr. McIver himself. Because he was one of your—

RL: He was the grandest man that ever lived.

JS: Tell us why people held him in such high esteem.

RL: Well, in those days they had just—women's education had—well, he's the one that founded the whole thing. He was the one. And he's the one that got us all going. And we who were not able to go, well, he's the one that provided us help so we could work. Oh, he was a grand man.

His oldest daughter was named Annie [Class of 1905]. And she wasn't pretty one bit, but she was a very intelligent girl. And I can see her now. She loved olives. And we wore hats, honey, every time we were out. We wore a hat. And those hats had hat pins. Ever see a hat pin?

JS: Yes, ma'am.

RL: Had a little black knob on them and went clear through your hat and all. And so she would buy a little bottle of olives about that high. And she would take her hat pin and stick it in the bottle and stick it through an olive. And she would walk through the campus eating that stuff.

JS: All right. Dr. McIver generally presided at the chapel programs, did he not?

RL: Most of the time, not all the time. But every single time that he held morning devotions, this is one thing that he always repeated: "Educate a man, and you educate an individual. Educate a girl or a woman, you educate a family."

JS: Well, that's true in your case, isn't it?

RL: Yes.

JS: It's certainly—

RL: Now, that's right now. If you educate the girl, when she marries and she tells something about her own children, you see.

JS: Yes, I've also read a quotation from Dr. McIver about his great concern about the people in this state who would never be able to go to college. Do you ever remember his comment about the obligation of the college-educated woman toward the people who could never go to college?

RL: I don't think I remember that.

JS: Well, he felt very strongly that the women who were educated there had a duty, an obligation, to go back and help people who could never be able to afford to come to college.

RL: Well, you see, we went back and most of us taught school.

JS: Yes.

RL: And that's where we taught all that stuff. I just taught everything. Now, I'll tell you this—those—about those two boys that were senior high school. Well they finished. They went on through. And one of them was—have you ever heard of Oriental [North Carolina]?

JS: Yes, ma'am, I certainly have.

RL: Well, this fellow went to Oriental and got a job in the bank. And up until he retired, I think he stayed there. And Curtis Potter—he had a relative up in New York, so he went up there. And this relative got him a job up there. And I never heard any more from him. Now, he stayed up there.

JS: You do very well to keep up with your students from so long ago.

RL: Well, I just happen to remember.

JS: Were you in one of the literary societies when you were at the college?

RL: Oh yes, I was a Cornelian. They had Cornelians and Adelphians.

JS: And you had great rivalry between them, did you not?

RL: Well, and we were not allowed to choose because they wanted them to be equal, you know?

JS: Yes.

RL: And so they put me in the Cornelian. And I had real good friends in Adelphian. And I was hoping I could get in there with them. Oh, we had to have about a private byword to get in.

JS: And you've never told anybody what your byword was?

RL: Well, it was all right to tell. I can tell you. T'was "mil lis" [sic]— more like. It meant more like. I don't know how on earth it was. But, anyway, we had to say mil lis, before we could get in.

JS: All right. What was some of the social events that the societies sponsored?

RL: The little Lord help my country. I don't think it was much.

JS: But you gave some plays, and some dramatic readings?

RL: No, no, no, we didn't.

JS: All right. Tell me something about the academic life at the school. Do you remember any of your teachers?

RL: Oh, yes. Miss [Gertrude] Mendenhall was the math teacher. And she knew that thing by heart. She never married. And Miss [Sue May] Kirkland was the lady principal. And she says, "I am Miss by choice." She wanted all the children to know that she never married by choice. She had chances to marry, you know? And then Dr. Smith was a history teacher. [Editor's note: Dr. William Cunningham Smith taught English at the time.] He's the best teacher I ever saw. And he taught by lecture. And so we had our notebook. And most of us would jot down just as fast as we could. And in the bottom of my old big trunk in Dr. Emory's [?] big, old basement is my old big trunk. And in the very bottom, very last part, is that thing. And I looked at it one time. It was an old thing.

JS: Well, that would be quite a treasure for you.

RL: Now, in some math or science—first year was physical geography your first semester. And botany the second. And botany—that's the science of flowers. And that's the only thing in all of my life that I studied that I never used. I never had any use. Never taught botany. But, anyway, my herbarium is in that old big trunk back down there in Emory's basement.

JS: Does this have pressed flowers in it?

RL: That's what it was. That's what it was.

JS: How did you attach those flowers to the page?

RL: We had some kind of little—I don't know what you call it. I don't remember. Some kind of little thin stuff you stuck it on with.

JS: But you didn't have Scotch tape in those days?

RL: No, no. I don't remember what it was.

JS: Did you have any sort of physical education or body training?

RL: No. Well I tell you, the first two years that we taught that we worked in the dining room, we didn't have to have it.

JS: I see.

RL: That took care of it.

JS: You got your exercise that way, I'm sure.

RL: Yes, we got our exercise.

JS: What were some of your responsibilities in the dining hall work?

RL: Well, let's see now. Marea Jordan and I washed glasses. We had two big sinks. And she—in the soapy water she would jostle them up and down like that and put them over in the clean water. And I would do the same. And then I would take them out them and dry them. And then we had some big trays. And after I dried them, I would put them on my tray. And so after we had finished all that, then we had to set the table. So I pushed that tray or cart—anyway, it had rollers you could push it around. And that's what I used all over the whole dining room.

JS: And this—

RL: About five hundred of us there then.

JS: And this work that you did made it possible for you to obtain your room and board?

RL: Yes.

JS: I see.

RL: Yes. That's what I did.

JS: Now I'd like to sort of wind this all up, if you can remember and think about this, Mrs. Lupton. In what ways would you say that your educational and maturing experience at the Normal, the State Normal and Industrial School, how did that experience prepare you for the tasks that you had to carry out in your life?

RL: Oh, my goodness, that changed my whole life. It changed me all over, you see. All over. I worked in the dining room, and, as I said, we were sixteen girls. And eight worked on the morning shift. And eight worked on the afternoon shift. And so we had to have our classes arranged so that it wouldn't interfere with the work.

JS: And when you got out—

RL: And at night, after supper, all sixteen of us—and we worked—we could finish in one hour then, all of us working together.

JS: And you had very stated times for the meals to begin. Everybody came and sat down at once?

RL: They certainly did. And there was a teacher, Miss [Laura Hill] Coit [Class of 1896], was the head teacher [taught physical education, math, English; became secretary and general assistant to the president]—was the head lady at my table.

JS: Oh, yes.

RL: Oh, Miss Coit was a grand lady. She certainly was.

JS: There's a dormitory up there named for her now.

RL: Well, I hope so. I didn't know that. But I hope so.

JS: She must have been a lovely person.

RL: Oh, my goodness. She was.

JS: And people used very good table manners and very proper—

RL: Now let me tell you. I never sat at Miss [Viola] Boddie's [Latin and French teacher] table. But she was an English teacher. And so one day a girl wanted a second helping or something. And so she asked if she could have some more. And Lord, Miss Boddie chewed her up. That's what we called it. They said, "She chewed her up." And she said, "We don't remember that you had any." You are not supposed to ask for more, you know? You could ask for it, but don't say you want more.

JS: So you were taught good manners as well as academic subjects?

RL: That we were.

JS: That's good.

RL: That we were.

JS: In what ways did your education prepare you for the things that you have had to do in the years since you were at the university?

RL: Well, it started out—I started out, you know, teaching. And then in 1904, there was a big fire. And then I went out in teaching a couple of years. And then 1906 I got married.

JS: What did your husband do?

RL: He was a minister. He was a minister.

JS: So you moved around a good bit?

RL: All over the Eastern Conference, all over it. Yes, we certainly did.

JS: But your educational background helped you wherever you went?

RL: Well, it certainly did now. I should say it did.

JS: Did you teach any more in public schools after you married?

RL: About—I had been married about three years, I reckon, and I taught one year.

JS: But you probably taught a number of Sunday school classes?

RL: Oh, yes, yes, yes. And by that time I had a baby. And so somebody had—I had a lady that took care of my baby while I was teaching school. But I never wanted to teach much school after I was married. I taught that one year. I don't think I taught any more.

JS: Thank you very much, Mrs. Lupton, for sharing all these experiences with us. These are great treasures for the university.

RL: Oh, mercy on me. My goodness.

[End of Interview]