UNCG ALUMNI ASSOCIATION ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Ruth Vick O'Brien

INTERVIEWER: Trudy Atkins

DATE: September 23, 1973

TA: Mrs. O'Brien, how did you happen to decide to go to N.C.C.W. [North Carolina College for Women, now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] in 1918, is that right? 1917?

RVO: It was very interesting thing. I was the oldest child of my father's second wife and old Dr. Robert Stancill was on the Board of Directors of the State Normal and Industrial College when my father married my mother. He said, "If you ever have a daughter send her to that school because if she promises to teach you won't have to pay any tuition for her." So long before I was born I was headed for the State Normal and Industrial College, but when I got there it was the North Carolina College for Women [N.C.C.W.].

TA: How old were you then?

RVO: I went to N.C.C.W. in September of 1916 [Editor's note: The name of the institution did not change from State Normal and Industrial College to North Carolina College for Women until 1919]. I wasn't quite sixteen years old because I wasn't sixteen until October 7, 1916, but I got in anyway. Near now the spring of April 1918, I had a serious operation. If it hadn't been for poor old Dr. [Anna] Gove [campus physician] and the Wesley Long Hospital, I would not have survived. My father took me home and I did not return to the college until January of 1919. I was supposed to have finished in '20 if I had gone on through so I had the benefit of friends in both the Class of '20 and the Class of '21.

TA: Do you remember some of the college rules and regulations that you learned at the college then that carried over to later years?

RVO: Yes I do, some very important regulations. Of course, we had a lot of them when I went there. But one that's carried me through these years has been the walking period we had to have every afternoon from 4:30 to 5:15 except Saturday and that is still my main exercise. When the weather is good I walk thirty to forty blocks everyday in the city. So that has been very important to me.

We had to go to chapel. They took our names. The prompters came along but it did us a lot of good. Dr. [Julius I.] Foust [campus president] always talked about service to the community in which you were living and I have never forgotten that because it is hard for me to turn down anything that sounds like community service like the Excellence Fund of the University of North Carolina and a member of the Board of

Directors of the National Folk Festival Association here in this city. So, it was very important.

Also, we had study hour from 7:00-9:45 [pm]. Well, all through the years, I have adhered to having hours for research and study and writing. I think that's very important. So those three things have carried over very well into my present life.

TA: Have you a focus for your research and study at this point? Is there any special field that you are studying or any special period or is it just general reading and browsing?

RVO: Just general reading now. Of course, as I go along I'll tell you a lot of things I have done in writing. When I was working with my husband, John T. O'Brien, I did all of his writing for him because he was very active in the political world and especially with union members. And he used to say, "Now just forget that you are a college graduate and have other degrees. You have to write this in third and fourth grade language so that these men can understand what the problems are with the senators and congressmen that they are trying to get elected."

TA: That's good advice for now, I think also. What changes have come about through the years, do you think, especially since N.C.C.W. has become Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina] and now The University [of North Carolina] at Greensboro?

RVO: Well, I think N.C.C.W. becoming a part of the greater university was a very fine thing because it offered so many opportunities for young people. They are more mature now than when I went there. As I said in this little piece, that until I went away to college I had never left my hometown of Seaboard, North Carolina, except to go with my parents to Ocean View, Virginia, on the Sunday School excursions. We never went out and spent the night with people. We just stayed at home.

We had a nice home and people provided lamps and books and all the things that they could. So there wasn't any particular reason for going away. When I went there we had one vacation that was at Christmas. But I heartily approve of the spring vacations where young people can go back home and pick up life and see how thing are there. I think that's very important.

Then I was very impressed when I was there at the university last fall when George Hamer [vice chancellor for development] and Janet took us on a night tour of the campus and we saw the high-rise dormitories. All I saw that I remembered was the old Administration Building [now Foust Building] and part of old Spencer Hall still standing. That was a wonderful trip that night.

TA: The next time you return you will see a ten-story library tower too. W.C. Jackson Library has a ten-story addition that will be dedicated in January or very shortly and you will enjoy seeing it. It will sort of be a dominating—

RVO: I think I will be through Greensboro sometime in November. So, of course, I always let Mr. Hamer know when I am coming through.

TA: Can you remember some of the faculty of those early days? I know for example that you had a number of courses under Dr. [Walter Clinton] Jackson.

RVO: Well, of course, the person who had the greatest influence on my life through all the years was Dr. Walter Clinton Jackson. I knew him as a teacher and then as the head of the Department of Social Science and then when he became president. He was the most stimulating teacher I ever had in my life. History became a real thing. All the great statesmen and even military heroes became living personalities as he lectured to us on the very facets of their character.

When I took office as field secretary of the North Carolina Education Association, the first secretary, he was president of the North Carolina Education Association.

Later a tragedy occurred in my life. My only son was killed in a terrible accident so I went back to the University of North Carolina [at Chapel Hill] to work on my master's degree and then the war [World War II] came. [J. Melville] Broughton was governor [of North Carolina] at that time [1941-1945] so he said I think you have had enough education. We've got to set up the Office of Price Control so come on and help us out with that.

So I went to see Dr. Jackson. I said, "This is a far cry from teaching and being field secretary of the State Education Association." What he said I will never forget. He said, "You can get anything you want, any heights you wish to reach but you'll pay a price," and I have. Every inch of the way I've paid the price. But I came here eventually to Washington [DC] to work in the Office of Price Administration where I met my second husband and we did have twenty years of a very stimulating married life. And then do you wish to know something about others?

Of course Miss Harriet Elliott [professor of political science (1913), dean of women (1935), consumer commissioner on the Advisory Commission to the Council of National Defense (1940-1941), chairman of the Woman's Division of the War Finance Committee (1942-1946), deputy director of the Office of Price Administration, and United States delegate to the United Nations Conference on Education, Science and Cultural Organization in London (1945)]. I remember her so vividly because she taught us the value of social legislation. In that day nobody ever thought anything about social legislation like unemployment compensation, Social Security, or Medicare. All those things we elderly people benefit from now. So she was a marvelous teacher in getting us interested in social legislation.

And then Dr. [Eduard] C. Lindeman who taught sociology and economics. It was because of him that I became interested in Y.W.C.A. work. So I wanted to go to New York and study the summer after I graduated in '21and my parents were bitterly opposed. They thought I should get married. So I went to see dear Miss [Laura Hill] Coit [Class of 1896, professor, college secretary, and general assistant to the college's president] and she let me have a loan with no security except my name. So I went on to New York and the first job I had was Girls Work Secretary in Athens, Georgia. I very quickly paid back the loan that the college so willingly let me have.

And, of course, I'll never forget Miss Emma King [English instructor, lady principal, and later dean of dormitories]. She was very tall. She was strict but she was very understanding. She required that we always be decently dressed and well mannered.

Mr. A.C. Hall taught creative writing. He still probably doesn't remember that I ever sat in his classes but he was a marvelous teacher of creative writing. And years went by and then I taught in my own hometown, Seaboard, North Carolina, in the school there in Seaboard where we wrote many little plays about life in our own community and at our doorstep. It was really Mr. Hall that aroused in me an interest in creative writing. We did lots of plays and took them to the Carolina Dramatic Programs in the spring and we always won all the first places.

Then Miss Frances Womble, who was a great friend of Miss Emma King. She taught me something that I have never forgotten and that was how to do a good outline when you are writing a piece and I still follow that. Two years ago, I completed a genealogy of the Vick family. It took a long time to go back into it because the first Vicks came from England in 1650. I also did a history of the little Methodist Church in Seaboard, which my father was a founding father. So what she taught me in learning how to make a basic outline has followed me through all the years of my life.

I'll never forget Miss Magnhilde Gullander [history professor]. She organized the International Relations Club and we had a lot of speakers, you know, of great note. That's where I learned a great deal about Japan, Russia, and Germany.

I could never forget Miss Viola Boddie [Latin and French professor], A lot of people were afraid of Miss Boddie. She was a stickler for having everything in Latin translated correctly but she taught us other things too. She taught us dignity and manners and I'll never forget her as long as I live. She was very beautiful when I went there. But, of course, the last time I saw her she had gotten old. All right I think those are the people that had a tremendous influence on my life that still carries on through these days.

TA: You worked in drama. You were the first woman president of the Carolina Dramatic Association in 1934.

RVO: Yes, the first woman president of the Carolina Dramatic Association. We wrote our little plays in the high school dramatic class that I taught in Seaboard. We also have a community, county-wide writing class that was set up by Dr. Bernice Kelly Harris who died three weeks ago. She did so many beautiful little plays that we took to Chapel Hill ourselves. Miss Kelly, as I always called her, had been in a nursing home for five months. She had a heart attack and she went right on. But one of the most attractive plays she ever did—and we were invited back years after I left North Carolina and was living in Washington to perform this play again—it was called "Caroline." It was about an old member of Kelly's family in Wake County who had always been the poor one that drew the water, did the washing, chopped the wood, [and] built the fires. She got tired of that so somebody said that we better take her to the county home. She didn't want to go but she went. Then finally they needed Caroline again so they sent for her this time. They thought they would marry her off to an old man. She came. She said I'm not going to stay here. You should see where I live. You punch a button you got lights; you turn a little screw you got water; you got nice beds and they give us a little money and we can to down to Raleigh every weekend. Don't ask me to come back here. The county home is the place for me. It was a complete marvelous production. The woman who played Caroline, a very great friend of mine, Mrs. Bullock. I said you were as good as Miss Helen Hayes [American stage and film actress]. She couldn't have been a better Caroline.

TA: Who was Mrs. Bullock?

ROV: Mrs. Bullock is Mrs. P.A. Bullock in Seaboard. She is almost a lifelong friend of mine and a great friend of Miss Kelly too. So all of us are in a great despair over Miss Kelly's death but she was getting very old, very old.

TA: She had been in an institution in North Carolina for many years?

ROV: Five months ago, she had been in a nursing home near Durham when she had the stroke. She couldn't stay in her home. She had a fine colored woman who stayed in the day but at night the woman had little children so there was nothing to do. So the day that they took her, a friend of Mrs. Bullock and another friend, Miss Audrey Long, were going to take her. So they went to her house and she said, "Here's a letter from Ruth," that's me. She said that if I go to the nursing home they'll teach me how to walk again because she said that when she was so sick in '67 and '68, she had to learn how to walk again. So she said, "Now I don't mind going because I know I can walk again if she could walk again." So that was the last contact I ever had with her.

TA: [Editor's note: The question asked by the interviewer was left off the original transcript.]

ROV: I lived in the part [of Spencer Dormitory] that was near Miss King's office right down the hall. On the way other end was called Rockingham because it was so far away. [Editor's note: Spencer Dormitory was nicknamed "Rockingham" by early students since it was so long that it appeared to go all the way north to Rockingham County.] Of course, they had the main dining room in the area where I was. No, I didn't have any peculiarities about eating, and the table was always a nice place. Usually a faculty member headed the table or a senior and it was a very happy relationship at the table all the time. It was very pleasant.

TA: Did the faculty try to direct the conversation toward elevated subjects or did you just discuss anything? Were you free to talk as you wish?

ROV: We talked about anything we wanted to talk about. One year, I sat at Miss Viola Boddie's table and she encouraged us not to talk about the subject matter we were studying but talk about things we were interested in: our families, our hobbies. So we did; even about our sweethearts. Imagine Miss Boddie wanting to know about the sweethearts, but she did. So it was all very informal.

TA: Could you date whenever you wished or were there restrictions on your dating and boyfriends?

ROV: Yes, ma'am. You had to get permission from home and then you would go and ask Miss King if you could have this date and present the little note from your parents. Then you could. Then the date would come to her office and the parlor was across the aisle from her office and there you would sit and wait for the boyfriend. Well, at that time we couldn't go out with them when I was a freshman or sophomore but by the time I was a

senior they could take us out to eat at hotels. We always had to be in by eleven o'clock and sign in. So, the restrictions weren't bad about it. I never had but one date anyway and my parents were highly in favor of that so there was no problem in getting permission to go out with a date.

TA: Have you been to campus recently and noticed the present dress of boys and girls? Have you any feeling about the long hair and the hippy style of living?

RVO: Well, no, because living here on the edge of George Washington University campus you see it all the time. Young students live here. Men and women who go to school over there with long hair and blue jeans and the sloppy shoes. Of course, we had to dress in a very dignified way, never any elegance, but we had to be simply and well dressed. No, I think it's all right. I don't see any use in worrying about the long hair or with boys with whiskers. This never concerns me at all. I think what's inside is the important thing and you find so many charming young men and women who do live here and go to G.W. University.

TA: You are on the Board of Directors of the American Folk Music Association?

RVO: The National Folk Festival Association.

TA: How did you become interested in folk music and folk life and folk lore?

RVO: Well, it really goes back to North Carolina. There was during my teaching days in Seaboard what they called the Bureau of Community Dramatics at Chapel Hill, which was sponsored by Dr. Frederick [Henry] Koch who had long since passed on. So, he was the one who brought folk lore plays to North Carolina. So then he got us all interested in folk music, folk dances, and folk life. And a woman who finally headed the Bureau under Dr. Koch was a woman by the name of Sarah Gertrude Knott. She had taught at Chowan College, a little Baptist college in eastern North Carolina, where I knew her because I was teaching close by. Sarah and I became great friends. Finally, she left there around 1940 and went out to St. Louis, Missouri.

The days of the [Great] Depression when the W.P.A. [Works Progress Administration] was sponsoring things for the unemployed. So being interested in folk lore and folk life and folk plays she started the folk life National Folk Festival Association and Dr. Paul Green was the first president of the National Folk Festival Association. Miss Knott is still living. She's no longer here in Washington. She was ill years go so she went back to Princeton, Kentucky, but she's still very active and every summer we have what we call the National Folk Festival at Wolf Trap [National] Park [for the Performing Arts] out here in Fairfax County [Virginia].

Mrs. Jouett Shouse [Catherine Filene Shouse] gave that beautiful piece of land and built one of the finest theaters in the country. She calls the theater the Filene Center because she was one the Filenes from the Filene Department Store in Massachusetts. Of course, Jouett Shouse, himself, was a very prominent man in Southern politics. So, every year for the last three years we've had the National Folk Festival Association out there for three days and four nights. So, the thing has been extremely successful.

TA: Are there plays and folk dancing, as well as I now there would be folk music?

RVO: There are folk dances, folk music, and people come from all over the country. First, we have these festivals all over the country. Then, the staff picks what they consider to be the best and they come to Washington. We pay their expenses and they stay at a school not too far away from Wolf Trap [National] Park. It's the only place of its kind in America. It is called the Wolf Trap [National] Park for Performing Arts and belongs to the National Park Service. She gave it to the National Park Service and it's a beautiful place.

TA: You are within a block of the Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts and have an opportunity to see the very best in arts today. How do you think the creativity in the arts today compares with say thirty years ago when you were so active in North Carolina drama?

RVO: We get the best at the Kennedy Center and then we get revivals of the best of the past. "Desert Song" played over there a long time. In Wolf Trap [National] Park they have great shows from all over the world. The Stuttgart Ballet comes there because the stage is perfect for a ballet performance. So, we have two good centers here; one in the country and the Kennedy Center across the street from this building.

TA: The Wolf Trap, is that wolf?

RVO: Wolf Trap [National] Park. Just like a trap for a wolf. You see, it was a farm here only there were wolves out there at that time, no longer, so it was called Wolf Trap [National] Park and she gave it to the National Park Service. Of course, they've done wonders in keeping it up and planting one of the most beautiful parks in the country, so they say.

TA: Is it outdoor theater?

RVO: Well, they have outdoor performances all during the day but the evening performances are held under a roof that is call the Filene Center. But, of course, our places outside are where young people like to sit because they don't have to pay but a dollar or two to sit outside. They have nice box seats and orchestra seats in the inside.

TA: [Editor's note: The question asked by the interviewer was left off the original transcript.]

RVO: In the public schools in our hometown, my first and only interest was that child that I taught. I never had any disciplinary problems. They came there to learn. Their parents were back of them and my job was to do everything I could to bring out all the fine things in their personalities and create in them an ambition to be somebody and they all have been somebodies. They haven't been governors or senators but they've all been good citizens in their communities.

TA: And that is the purpose of education: travels. You have traveled extensively, I know.

RVO: No. The trip through South America was the longest trip we had. Of course, we did a lot of traveling in this country. We wanted to go to Ireland because his parents were born in Ireland. He was the first generation. We planned to go in September 1965 when he died. About the marriage, of course, I am a Protestant and a Methodist and still am a member of the little Seaboard Methodist Church. He was a Catholic, a Roman Catholic.

TA: At that time it was a serious thing.

RVO: Yes it was. Now it doesn't make any difference. When he died, he died at a farm we owned up near Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, that he loved very much. He was buried from St. Stephen the Martyr over here on Pennsylvania Avenue and next to John Kennedy's funeral it was the biggest funeral ever held in Washington because we had to hold the funeral off so the senators and congressmen would be here because he helped to elect so many of them. But, he was buried in my own little country cemetery in Seaboard. That's where he wanted to go because there was no more family out in Montana.

TA: Does he have family in Ireland? Does he have relatives?

RVO: He didn't know. He thought perhaps he might find somebody that he knew a little something about from his mother who had been dead many years, but we never knew anything.

TA: You must feel a real debt of gratitude to the university to remember it as well, both monetarily and in your will.

RVO: One-half of the residue of the estate after a few minor bequests goes to The University [of North Carolina] at Greensboro in memory of Dr. Jackson. The other half goes to the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati in memory of my husband. The Sisters of Charity have long been friends of mine. The order was founded by Mother Seton, a woman named Mrs. [Elizabeth Ann] Seton up here at Emmitsburg, Maryland. That's where she did her early work, where she lived, where she died, and where she's buried. Sister Mary Janet who was assistant Mother Superior of the order in Cincinnati retired and went to Colorado Springs where they have a retreat center there given by a very wealthy family. People of all denominations go there. It isn't restricted to Catholics. No more do you have that restriction that the old Catholics used to make. The sisters all wore pretty clothes. They didn't wear all those ugly looking swooping garments; beautiful suits, nice shoes, silk stocking. They look charming.

TA: Of all the people you have known in your life, which one had the greatest influence on you besides Mr. O'Brien and Dr. Jackson? Is there a one person in your life that you would like to have met in your lifetime and never had an opportunity to but you admired without knowing them? For example, maybe it would be President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt or maybe you knew him.

RVO: I did and President [Harry S.] Truman too. I knew both of them.

TA: How do you evaluate each of the men? Could you evaluate each of them as people and as presidents?

RVO: Well, the Roosevelt legislation was the greatest era social legislation [in] the history of the country and it will never come off the books. It's there and it will stay. Harry Truman was a wonderful president and I'll never forget what he said, "The buck stops here." He was the man who could make a decision, and difficult decisions. He was a great friend of the working man all through his career. Of course, so was Franklin Roosevelt, he would never have been elected if he hadn't been.

TA: Do you think that Mr. Roosevelt really created the social legislation that he had been given all the credit for: the social security and so many of the things that he did for the working man? How could he from his lofty position have been able to foresee the need?

RVO: Well, of course, we had gone through the terrible [Great] Depression where we had the bread lines, the unemployment, and starvation in the country. I think he just looked at the facts. Something has to be done or our government will have to turn that we don't want to have to turn to a way because at that time we were way over left in a lot of ways. I think he just looked at the situation and said now is the time to do these things and he did.

TA: Mr. Truman was a man who was made by the times. He stepped into a position that probably no one else could have done. Did you know General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower?

RVO: Just [when] he was in the White House. Of course, he was beloved because of his war career and highly respected.

TA: And he was forgiven things that other men might never have been forgiven for. And, of course, Mr. Kennedy, John Kennedy.

RVO: He had such a little bit of time. Lyndon Johnson left a terrific imprint upon this country. He was one of our great presidents, one of our very great presidents who did fine work. Under his administration the Medicare Bill was passed, bills for elementary, secondary higher education. He was a great educational leader.

TA: Well now, you worked on getting the Medicare—that was the last legislation that your firm worked on.

RVO: We worked in his 1964 campaign.

TA: Are you the ones that brought him or at least brought "Lady Bird" [Claudia Alta Taylor Johnson was First Lady of the United States (1963–1969) as the wife of the 36th President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson] to Greensboro? She came on a whistle stop train and came to campus.

RVO: I know she did. Well, somebody said some day we'd have a woman president of the United States. I said I'd vote for Lady Bird any day. She was a great source of help to Mr. Johnson.

TA: She seemed to be a very leveling influence for him.

RVO: Yes, he needed a woman like Lady Bird.

TA: She has certainly proved to be a great lady since his death.

RVO: Yes she was. One of the finest first ladies we ever had.

TA: When you worked on a campaign in Medicare, for example, how did your firm operate?

RVO: Well, mainly you had to go out and elect senators and congressmen who would pledge for Medicare. And, through Lyndon's help, it was done and the Medicare Bill was passed. I've certainly been a beneficiary of it, too.

[Since] July 1st 1967, I'd been going through my husband's stuff and trying to settle the estate and one day I went over to Doctor's Hospital for a check-up. I felt terrible and that was the last I know until January of 1968. For six months, I lay in a coma at the point of death. My nephew was living then so he came here and he said to the doctor, "She's going to die. If there is anything you can do she has plenty of money to pay the bills. Bring in all the specialists you can find." I had a very terrible problem that nobody has ever survived, liver failure, not cirrhosis, but liver failure. At that time there was nothing being done on liver transplants. You couldn't do that and I was dying every day. So finally there was a drug that one of the old doctors knew, old Dr. Guyer, that had not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration but he said she's going to die so let's give it to her. You swell terribly all over and are unconscious. So, they gave it to me. I snapped right out of it and the fluid went away.

[On] January 15, 1968, Dr. Crestwell, my physician, took me to a nursing home here in town where I had to learn how to walk and learn to use your hands, telephone. So, the private duty nurses really save your life, you know, under the doctors' instruction. If I hadn't had Medicare, I don't know how I would have survived the finances. When it was all over with it totaled to $75,000, but, of course, a lot of that went for private duty nurses because Medicare doesn't care for that but it does for your room. Being in a dying condition, I had to have a private room and it helped pay for the physicians. When I finally got through paying I didn't have to pay all the $75,000 myself, I did but I got a lot of it back.

TA: You look marvelous now.

RVO: I'm fine. I'm in good health. The only thing is traveling around. The trains are bad. I can't get anywhere on the trains anymore so I depend upon my great nephew, Dickie Harris, who lives in Seaboard or my sister-in-law who is a widow— Ida Vick, who lives in Weldon. So we get around a lot and I have friends here in town that take me [to] a lot of places.

TA: Are you any relation to Vick Chemical Company?

RVO: Yes, when I was working on the genealogy of the Vicks. It's a funny thing the way they started. The people that own it, the Richardsons—one of the Richardson women had married a Dr. Vick in Selma, North Carolina, who was a pharmacist. They couldn't call it, "Richardson's Pneumonia Cure" or "Richardson's Nose Drops" so to simplify this they called it, "Vicks," which was from the old pharmacist.

TA: And he didn't even create it.

RVO: Yeah, and that's the way, no kin whatsoever. Of course old Dr. Vick was way back yonder. That's the way it came about.

TA: Rich Preyer has certainly been a splendid congressman. [Editor's note: Lunsford Richardson Preyer was a North Carolina congressman from 1969-1981and married to Emily Harris, Class of 1939.]

TA: Oh, he's made the finest congressman and she's such an able woman. They live over the Watergate, you know.

[End of Interview]