

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO
INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Hilda Burton Fountain

INTERVIEWER: Hermann Trojanowski

DATE: September 15, 2006

HT: Today is Friday, September 15, 2006, and the time is about fifteen 'til ten [9:45 a.m.] and my name is Hermann Trojanowski and I'm at the home of—

HF: Hilda Fountain.

HT: —Hilda Fountain in High Point, North Carolina, conducting an oral history interview for the UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] Institutional Memory Project. Well, Mrs. Fountain, thank you so much for talking with me. If you'll give me your full name, we'll use it as a test to see how your voice sounds.

HF: I was Hilda Burton as a student and I was graduated in 1929.

[recording paused]

HT: Could you tell me something about your background; where and when you were born?

HF: Well, I was born in one of North Carolina's poorest counties, Onslow County, which nobody ever heard of until Camp Lejeune took it over. We used to have a lot of fun, water sports and things, but now we can't even wash our feet because the Marine base has taken all the water from everywhere. And, so that put an end to all of our going down to New River. Onslow County has its own river and the New River runs, of course, into the ocean. And we used to have lots of fun going down there, but no more. And New River is—I'll tell you how wonderful it is, it's the widest river in the world for its length. It's twenty-five miles long; rises and falls in Onslow County. I learned that years ago from Dr. Fred Olds who was a historian in Raleigh [North Carolina] and so I've always remembered.

But I was of the time when there were eleven grades in school and therefore, I graduated at sixteen and went off to UNCG [Editor's note: during Mrs. Fountain's time at the college, the name of the college was North Carolina College for Women] at sixteen years of age. I turned seventeen before Christmas, but I was pretty young. But anyway, I had a roommate who was also my friend in high school from my county and there was another girl who was an upper classman who went with us and I think to get into this we

need to understand the situation. There weren't the general populations living that long ago because in our county, at the time, we only had one paved road and that was about forty miles each way toward New Bern [North Carolina] and toward Wilmington [North Carolina] and it was only twelve feet wide. You met somebody—the courtesy of the road was each one got two wheels off in that old sand down there, you know. Well, when I left to go to UNCG there was no thing like bus service, there was no thing like airplanes, of course, who had heard of them? So, we had to go to New Bern and my father did have a car and took us to New Bern and we caught the train there so we would not have to stay in New Bern overnight to get the train out and then we had the—at Selma [North Carolina], we had to change trains and come into Greensboro [North Carolina] where we were met down at the station by a dray, which was a horse and wagon, to bring our trunks. You see, we didn't have all of the concessions that you have these days—it takes a car and a truck to take the kid to school. But, we had one trunk and then our hand luggage and we were met at the station and the trunks were loaded on these drays pulled by a horse to go out to college. We had our trunks in our room long enough to unpack and then the trunks were put in the basement until we came away in the spring. And so I tell you, it cut down on the possessions you had in school.

While I was there, from some departing senior, I bought a record player and a bookshelf and a rocking chair and I've wondered since if those old items are still circulating around because nobody took home that sort of thing. [both laugh] We didn't have trucks and stuff to haul it home and you didn't have those plastic baskets that everybody carries now with lids on them with all their stuff in them. We packed one trunk. And the rooms were spartan also. There was a dresser with three drawers and a mirror and of course, I don't know whether they have the luxury of a suite with a bathroom between rooms and stuff now or not but we certainly had bathrooms that accommodated about twelve or something. At the time you could go in and there were a string of sinks on each side and that sort of thing. And I lived in Spencer [Residence Hall] for two years and the dining room was opened off of a hall. You went down about a half a dozen steps and here was the dining room at Spencer. And there was also, under the dining room, was a basement where we girls danced, you see. Each of us, you know, girls dancing together. We had no—I was always a boy. [both laugh]

HT: You always did the leading.

HF: Yes, I got to lead. And, of course, the music was from some old record player. But, for me, my roommate was a music major which separated our activities at school. I did my studying always in the library somehow I could concentrate more, but of course, that closed around nine o'clock or something and if you had other things to do; you had to do that at home. But I could never could study or write papers or anything very well in my room so somehow I got to the library. For me, I was always interested in history and I've said I was interested in history, and now I am history. [both laugh] So, I guess I was a pretty good student in history and when it was coming up test time I had a little mess of five or six other girls that would come in my room and we'd have a little review and I always led the review for them. They always counted on me to help them get through the test. But I did pretty well. I wasn't ashamed of my record.

And I had a very special history teacher, Marjorie Mendenhall, she was from Greensboro herself, but she was a very good history teacher and I certainly enjoyed her classes and of course, we took—one of the outstanding things was my study of botany with Dr. [John Paul] Givler; G-I-V-L-E-R. But he was, he really was inspiring and he was not easy but I enjoyed his class. He was one of the professors I still remember. In English was Professor A. C. Hall and everybody loved Mr. Hall. He was witty and made classes fun, as well. He was not a freshman teacher. My freshman teacher was Miss [Anne Elder] Ketchin; K-E-T-C-H-I-N and she was demanding and I remember our freshman year, this was her usual habit, she assigned you to write a theme every day for two weeks. Even if it wasn't a class day, you had to bring that theme over and stick it under the door of her office. And I tell you, you got dry by the end of two weeks writing that theme every night, but we got through that, and I have not forgotten that requirement either. [laughs] Those were really some of my outstanding underclass, freshman and sophomore teachers. Then, of course, when we got to be juniors or seniors we got to have more electives. Miss [Harriet] Elliott, in government, everybody wanted to take Miss Elliott's class in Government and I guess she was a—would be called a liberal these days, a progressive sort of person and she was into politics. And so it was nice to be in her class during election year, particularly, and she—I don't know how many years she was there, but she stayed right on.

HT: She was very prominent during the war [World War II] in the Democratic Party.

HF: Yes. And so she was another of the upper class favorites of everybody. But, of course, the things that were fun too were things that happened outside of class. Of course, when we went—my years at UNCG, we were not allowed to ride in a car as a freshman. You just weren't allowed. If you wanted to go uptown, of course, we had to be hatted and gloved and somehow I think walking uptown from UNCG now would be a real chore, but it was sort of fun to us all back then. We walked to First Presbyterian Church on Sundays to services. That must be a mile, isn't it?

HT: It's much further; it's about two or three miles.

HF: And we walked downtown. We couldn't go downtown as freshman but once a week and then by the time we got to be senior you were so involved you didn't have much time to go downtown, or I didn't. And of course, everything was so strict back then in every way. You couldn't have a—if a guy came by to see you, you were granted thirty minutes unless you had it prearranged for Saturday night or Friday night. But to just come by to see you without having a date, you got thirty minutes, and that's all and there was always somebody right across the hall. You knew you had a chaperon right across the hall. But when I was a sophomore, the man I married was a senior down at State [North Carolina State College] and he came up every weekend and I was living in Spencer [Residence Hall] that year and so we were—I would get some of my friends to hold two chairs right in front of the windows, we'd turn the chairs with their backs to the room, you know, and I'd have friends hold them until he got there and that was where we did our courting. But even that was pretty [unclear] because there might be another pair over here and another

one over here. You didn't have much privacy, I guarantee you that, but somehow we made it, we got married, so—. [both laugh]

And then as I – well, even then, we could go away for the weekend with proper permission and so on, and I had a cousin down at Chapel Hill [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill] and he would invite me down to dances there and then I would be a girl. [both laugh] And then, I'd go down to State College now and again, to dances there. So we had some fun and we would—the group I was with included a girl from High Point, and we would get out on a Saturday and thumb rides. And we wouldn't think of doing it these days, but we would catch rides over here in High Point at Dot's house and her father ran a jewelry store downtown and so Dot would be with us and catch rides with us and come over and visit and if none of her family could take us back, she had a brother, we would thumb rides back. It was no problem at all. And we didn't question the safety of it like you'd have to do now. So the world has changed.

HT: What was Dot's name? Do you recall? What was Dot's last name?

HF: Stamey. S-T-A-M-E-Y.

HT: Thank you.

HF: Dot Stamey. And she was—she roomed on my hall in Spencer and that's how I got acquainted with her. Well, my roommate and I were freshman but we seemed to be on a hall with juniors and seniors. So, in my freshman year, my roommate was dating the same cousin who was in school at Chapel Hill [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill]. And they broke up and I would sing these mournful love songs to her at night and here she'd be over there with her heart breaking and tears rolling down her face at their breaking up and me singing her those old mournful love songs. [both laugh] I can't even think of them now. Back then, I knew what they had listened to and I'd sing them. All sorts of dumb stuff, you know like kids do.

Well, let's see what else can I—in my junior year I went over to Shaw [Residence Hall]; third floor Shaw. I think that old room was on the front. Every time I go by I look at it and remember. And the counselor, I guess you'd call them, in that dormitory was Lillian Killingworth. And that name fitted her. I don't think she ever saw any humor in Christendom. And she was—she looked awfully old to me but, you know, to seventeen year old eyes, anybody over thirty-five looks old. But she was, she just tried to put the fear of God in us all and we couldn't wake up in the morning and want to run to breakfast and we didn't have time to get dressed and put on our raincoats and shoes and socks. We weren't supposed to—knee socks were the bug back then. But she didn't want us to wear knee socks so she'd pull up your raincoats and look and see if you were thoroughly dressed. And something else in my day, our rooms were inspected by a matron and she would come around maybe every two weeks, you never knew when, you didn't lock your room, of course, nobody's room was locked, and inspect your room and see if you had crackers under your pillow or anything like that, I guess, I don't know what they were really looking for, but you had to keep your room—they didn't put up with unmade beds or something like that. But Miss Killingsworth, her name fitted her, really, I don't know what ever happened to her but she made everybody's life about as miserable as she could.

She had no feeling for anybody. I remember it well, being one of those, she yanked up my raincoat and saw that I had socks and my knees were showing under that raincoat and that was a hanging crime.

And one thing else, I got called up another time. The Western Union—nobody knows what Western Union is any more, but a Western Union boy brought you telegrams and rode up out a bicycle. So one day, I was walking along near the library, heading for the library, and here was this Western Union boy and I said, “Let me ride your bicycle. Okay. Let me get on to ride the bicycle.” So I rode up and down College Avenue there; about one time up and down or something. Next morning, I am called in by the dean of students and what was her name, I about forgot her name but—and she said to me, “Hilda, you who I trusted were riding that bicycle.” She made me think I had committed a hanging crime but that’s just the way things were in my day and no wonder it had to be changed because it was pretty strict.

And I was talking about nobody; a freshman at least, could ride in a car. Now if you were a senior, you might be able to but one time there were four girls and I know Ella Burton Hutchinson was one and a girl from over here, Casey Ingram, was another and there were about four of them rode in a car and they were suspended for several weeks to punish them. Casey lived right over here on [unclear], Casey Ingram, and that was—I mean that was such sin they committed. So they were suspended a few weeks from school.

HT: Did any of the students have their own cars on campus in those days?

HF: What?

HT: Did any of the girls have their own cars on campus?

HF: Cars? Who ever thought of cars? Gosh, it made my day, just think about it, how long has it been, seventy years ago, or seventy-five since I went away to school? Who was it, I went away at sixteen and it was in 1925 that I went; from '25, that’s about eighty years ago?

HT: Yes.

HF: Well, the parents were lucky to have one car in the family back then and like I said, there were no paved roads, not up here really as they are, of course, now. So far as any college age kid having a car, that’s a thing that we dreamed of. There were one or two boys, a few down at State [North Carolina State College, Raleigh, North Carolina] and Carolina [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill] who had old jalopies but you didn’t have to be concerned about parking places, I tell you that. And you couldn’t ride in a car much less having heard of someone owning one when I was in school. But we all got through and shed tears of regret when leaving but—. I worked in Greensboro one summer after my junior year, and I myself had the job of being the counselor in Shaw Dormitory; that was the summer after my junior year, just for the summer school. So I did that from five o’clock on; during the day I worked downtown. And—but I did not pull up anybody’s raincoat to see if they had on socks or stuff like that; it was more of a relaxed atmosphere.

But of course, in summer school we had—it was more of a mixture of old and young who came, I mean a lot of times it was teachers coming together for courses for certification or something.

HT: What made you decide to go to what is now UNCG?

HF: What?

HT: What made you decide to go to what is now UNCG?

HF: Well, because a woman at my home that I had admired so much had gone to Randolph-Macon [College, Ashland, Virginia]. I wanted, I thought, to go to Randolph-Macon. But my father said transportation was were so poor back then, and if I went to Randolph-Macon it would be so hard to get back and forth and I imagine it was just like it would be now, more expensive there and when I was going my freshman year at UNCG, he had two others in school—three others were in school my freshman year and that was a little heavy and so I imagine that had some—but he didn't ever tell me I couldn't go there because he didn't have the money. But my brother was a senior at State that year and then my other brother was off in [unclear] Academy up there in the mountains. So he decided that I better go to UNCG because I could get back and forth easier. And transportation was not the easiest thing. Now buses did come on line during the years I was in school but at first—I remember when I was a freshman and went home at Christmas and I had to go to Wilmington and my parents met me down there which was fifty miles away. But then as time went on, I came back and forth on the bus and that made it easier. But then when I graduated and all, my parents came up in a car then. So what else can I tell you?

HT: Well, do you remember what your favorite courses and subjects were?

HF: My favorite courses were always history and English and then I got sort of off on a tangent in sociology and when I was graduating I had a scholarship to Smith College in North Hampton, Massachusetts to study psychiatric social work and I told my parents about it and my daddy said, "Hilda is never—I'd be crazy myself to let her go into psychiatric social work." So, guess what, I got married instead. [both laugh] So, I graduated in June and got married in October. And that is where real history began; when I got married and had three boys. [both laugh] So I've been making history ever since.

HT: So after you graduated, did you work at all before you got married?

HF: No, I did not. I got married and guess what? Broke the bank. The recession came up.

HT: Right, the crash of '29.

HF: About two weeks after we got married and there was not a job anybody could get. I did make some applications, but there were just no jobs. I mean, it's hard to even imagine how the whole economy hit bottom. It was really an awful time. Now, my husband was working for Liberty Mutual Insurance Company and he didn't—he did not lose his job,

but he did not get, through those years, the expected raises that one might think of and he got a cut in pay just before our first child was born. That was fun, wasn't it? [both laugh] So, so we've been through it all, but I did do substitute teaching in Norfolk [Virginia], that's where we were living when we were married, and I did substitute teaching there and I was not like Carol [unclear], I was not a great scientist, I did not take—I did take biology and botany and that's as far as I went. I never took any physics. At one time I was called on in Norfolk, to substitute and I had applied to substitute in social studies. Well, they put me to teaching physics and I had to teach the gas engine. I never worked as hard in my life as I did trying to learn how to explain the gas engine to those kids but when it was over I bet I could have taken apart a Ford engine.

HT: Was this high school?

HF: I stayed there for about six weeks at that particular time because the woman had broken her hip or something.

HT: Was this teaching high school students?

HF: It was junior high.

HT: Junior high.

HF: So I—well I did do a little substituting here in High Point, but not much. But then— [phone rings] I'll get it.

[recording paused]

HF: What else can I—?

HT: You were talking about teaching the kids all about gas engines.

HF: Oh yes, and so that was my longest siege of substituting in Norfolk and that was right funny because in, you know, you have the regulations in school, you go up one stairs for coming and another stairs for going. Well I was going up or down the staircase or something and one of the faculty members called me down and I said, "Well, I'm a substitute teacher." [laughs] I guess I wasn't about—I was twenty-one then. So I even got called down at the high school.

HT: Did you ever become a regular teacher?

HF: No. I never did teach regularly. As a matter of fact, I didn't. After we left Norfolk—we stayed there for five years, and after we left there I didn't work anymore until after we were in this house and I substituted over at the junior high here and at the elementary school here. My longest sojourn was at the elementary. But then I got into social work

which I hadn't meant to, really. But I've done every old job of that variety. My first job was working with housing projects. When we were—our first property housing units in High Point; the Daniel Brooks Homes and Clara Cox Homes. And Daniel Brooks was for blacks and Clara Cox for whites at that time—of course, now they would not be segregated. And so I was Tenant Selection Supervisor down there and I worked down there about three years and I was expecting another child so I gave that up and didn't work anymore for four or five years. And then I went to work for the Department of Social Work. And then I had a bad case load and after a while they moved me down to take applications; all day long sitting in the office and take applications and gave my caseload to another case worker. Well, I stayed in that office and I couldn't stand it because I'm a sort of an outside person and finally I said to this parole officer who was there, I said, "I've got to get out of this office. Can you tell me where I can get a job?" And he said, "Well, you understood the Probation Department needed somebody—" Well, I applied at the Probation Department and I got the job and I worked at that for about fourteen years until I was forced into retirement by my age and I think I ought to sue them yet, don't you?

HT: Sure. [both laugh]

HF: For discriminating about my age. [both laugh] So all together, I worked for the state—my retirement housing project didn't count but the time with the Welfare Department and as Probation Officer, so I worked for the state for twenty-five years. And since then, I have just been home and involved in volunteering and I've been in this house by myself for twenty-three—almost twenty-three years now. And it hasn't all been fun, but I've made the best of it, it seemed like it, I mean, I hope I've made the best of it. But I've been—I still volunteer at the hospital and I volunteer over at the church some and that's about the extent of my activities these days. So now, I'm just coming up to my ninety-eighth birthday and everybody's bringing me pictures to show me someone who lived to be a hundred and ten [years old] and all like that. So they want me to aspire to something like that. Even the guy at High Point Foundation sent me a letter the other day about ten pictures of people living over a hundred but I—and my mind is here in a detached sort of way [laughs] at times I think. I forget where I put stuff now and again. But I'm able to manage my own affairs for the most part. I do talk to the boys some. I've got three boys and I do talk to them some. I didn't; I kept my counsel, I didn't even talk to them, but a few years ago I decided, "Well, some of them ought to know a little a bit so they'll even know—they can find my checkbook if I do pass on." So, I guess Stewart [Fountain] knows really more about that sort of thing than the others because he has come around more often and—but beyond that, even so, I manage my own stuff and sometimes it gets pretty wearing but up to now I haven't had to have a caretaker, but the day may come—[laughs] So, what else do you want to know?

HT: Well, just a couple of more questions about your college days. What do you recall about Dr. [Julius] Foust?

HF: Well, no. I was with the Debating Society and so I was designated to go and see Dr. Foust. We hadn't been organized but about six months or something and I was designated

to go see Dr. Foust to see if we could enter in with some other college and have our team from UNCG debate the team from—and he said no, that we hadn't had club long enough or weren't experienced enough so that was really about my only contact with Dr. Foust. He was always very dignified. He wasn't a person I remember with a great sense of humor or anything like that. He was very staid and dignified in an old way.

HT: How about Dr. Walter Clinton Jackson?

HF: Oh, Walter Jackson. He was everybody's love. I've got a book of his now I found not long ago and I had to buy it. He was the best history teacher anybody could ever [have]. His daughter Virginia [Jackson] was one of my classmates too. But he was just so approachable, Dr. Jackson was, and everybody wanted to get in his classes so he was really a standout. Wasn't he the acting president at one time?

HT: He became President after Dr. Foust retired.

HF: After Dr. Foust, yes. But he was really everybody's favorite person.

HT: I worked for his grandson a number of years ago.

HF: Oh really? Was he Virginia's son?

HT: No, Clint Jr.'s [Walter Clinton Jackson, Jr.] son.

HF: Oh, I see. Well, he was a lovable human being.

HT: How about Mr. [Edward] Forney?

HF: Well, I didn't know Mr. Forney except to pay him my tuition. So I really—there were those who took commercial courses; he had several. I don't know if they give those one year commercial courses now.

HT: No, they stopped that a number of years ago.

HF: Well, there were girls up there who were taking his commercial courses but I had no contact other than paying my bills with him.

HT: Did you know Katherine Taylor by any chance? Katherine Taylor?

HF: Oh, Katherine, she was—I think she was a junior about the time that I was a freshman and she was the president of the student government when she was a senior and I was a sophomore and everybody respected her.

HT: She was a great beauty.

HF: Yes. She had a lot of sense too. I mean, she was an outstanding student as well. So, she had the respect of the whole, the total student—her compatriots, she had their respect. And I know when she was on the faculty she was well respected.

HT: I think she taught French later and became Dean of Women.

HF: Yes, I know she became Dean of Women later on. I know they respected her. Miss [Sue Stone] Durand was the Dean of Women that called me up, you know, for riding the bicycle; Miss Durand.

HT: Did you ever work when you were at UNCG, like at the dining halls or at the library or anything like that, to help pay for tuition? I know that many girls did.

HF: Say that again.

HT: Did you ever work in the library?

HF: No, I never did, nor did I ever work around the dining room, but I tell you, on Mondays, we always were sure we had goat. The odor I can still smell it from the dining room. We were sure it was goat; I'm not sure what kind of meat it was [both laugh]. I remember my brother and his friend came by one time and I invited them to lunch and that was the odor that met us.

HT: Oh gosh. Now the college had a farm on campus at one time. Was it still there when you got there? A farm.

HF: No, not that I ever knew of.

HT: I think it might have moved out to Guilford College about 1925.

HF: Well, I never knew of it, if so.

HT: It was a dairy farm.

HF: Well, I never knew of it.

HT: Well, do you have any other memories that you want to share with us today about your college days?

HF: Well, I'll think of them when you leave. I'll think about "I shoulda. I shoulda told you." [both laugh]

HT: Oh yes, oh yes. I know. Well I know you remember, what's the name of that club; the Cornelian [Literary Society]?

HF: Oh, there were these societies. We did not have any sororities.

HT: Cornelian, that's it.

HF: Cornelian, and I was a Cornelian, but really, those societies really didn't have that much meaning to me, I belonged to—

[End of Tape 1, Side A, Begin Tape 1, Side B]

HF: —stuff there and I was a part of them because everybody was assigned to one or another, and I was a Cornelian.

HT: And you also worked on the school newspaper for a little while, I understand.

HF: Yes.

HT: Did you enjoy being a reporter?

HF: So, that was so—

[recording paused]

HT: Mrs. Fountain, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today. We really appreciate it. Is there anything you would like to add to this interview? Again, thank you so much for your time and your wonderful stories. It was really great to listen to you.

[End of Interview]