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Edna Mc Iver

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Edna A. McIver / Drusilla Nixon
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 4, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 651
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 651

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Reared in El Paso, daughter of Dr. Lawrence Nixon;
one of the first black students at Texas Western College.
Nixon - McIver's mother

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Memories of attending Texas Western College, including
relations with students and professors; discrimination en-
countered while out of town on school trips; professors who
influenced her.

Length of interview: 50 minutes Length of transcript: 23 pages

Edna A. McIver
Interviewed by Rebecca Craver
February 4, 1984

C: Okay, let's just start out, and tell me what years you were a student at UTEP and why you decided to go there.

M: Well, I was there from September of 1956 until May of 1960.

C: And so you did graduate?

M: Yes.

C: What did you major in?

M: In Music Education. I never in my whole life wanted to teach school, and all my life I had studied Music and hadn't really prepared for going into any other field other than Music. But I was a very shy little girl and a sort of shy young lady. I outgrew it, but but /I/ didn't want teach but /I/ didn't want to go on a concert state. I just knew I would never be a concert pianist. But I majored in Music, and was very adamant about the fact that I did not want to teach. Dr. Thormesgard, who was head of the department then, he talked me into applying for a degree in Music Education rather than just Applied Music, which I did. So when I graduated I taught for a year and a half, public school Music.

C: There in El Paso?

M: There in El Paso, at the school where I grew up.

C: Which was?

M: Douglas. I taught kindergarten Music twice a week at

the kindergarten that was connected with the school. I taught fourth grade Music twice a week, and I taught all of the grades up through eighth grade-- Choral Music. I taught Band and I taught Orchestra, and then I taught first, second and third grade Music once a week. That was a lot. (Laughter)

C: That was a lot of preparation, wasn't it?

M: Yeah. I don't know, I had a lot of different feelings about how young people should be taught to teach in public school. Once I had gotten out of college and into school I thought to myself, now that I'm a teacher I'm going to make such a big difference in everybody's life, and it just doesn't work that way. In our education classes we were basically taught to teach in the ideal situations. And even back then, I don't know how it is now, but when we went to in-service meetings once we were out in the teaching field, our in-service meetings were held at some of the best schools in the city with some of the brightest students in the city, and with all kinds of marvelous equipment and all. And we were supposed to be able to teach our students the same thing that those students were learning and get basically the same results, and that isn't what happened. I don't know, I was just so extremely sensitive to so many things that I didn't even expect to teach school and find whole classes of children that didn't smile and children that

were underfed, and that just wasn't for me.

Now, I feel that since I've raised five children of my own and I understand first hand from the time they're babies up until now what the learning process is all about, then I could go back and I'd be a much better teacher.

C: I think that's probably true of all us.

M: Yeah.

C: When you went to UTEP, did you live at home?

M: Yes, I did. No, I didn't live on campus. I commuted.

C: What student groups or in what activities did you participate when you were a student?

M: Well, being a Music major, I was in the choir, I was in Band. I played clarinet. And I had played flute also in high school, but in college I played clarinet and contrabass clarinet--clarinet in the marching band and contrabass clarinet in the concert band. I was also a member of the Texas--it was Texas Western College then--Texas Western El Paso Community College Opera Chorus, which I really enjoyed, just enjoyed that tremendously. Especially the area that I enjoyed the most was painting stage sets, and I just enjoyed that so much. Art is really, has always been my first love, and I just didn't major in that in that I just hadn't had any background other than just working on my own and growing up in galleries and museums and what have you. But that I really enjoyed.

I was also a member of the band sorority. And save my soul (laughs), I can't even remember what it's called. It's a national sorority, the fraternity and sorority for band members, and was president of that I think the second year that we had the sorority there. And when I was there it was the first time Texas Western had the band sorority and fraternity. Then I was a member of one of the service organizations. It was all girls. Anyway, I was a member of that, and from what I can remember, we weren't that active on campus. We did little things like one year /we/ helped build a float for the Homecoming Parade, and we helped with little fund raisers and passing out literature to students coming in, freshman, and like that.

C: When you were a student, were the Homecoming Parades still going on in town, or were they only on the campus? Do you remember any?

M: They were really basically around the campus areas.

C: Now when you started in 1956, Texas Western had been integrated how long? When did they integrate?

M: A year.

C: A year?

M: It had only been integrated, yes, just a year.

C: Then you were one of the first blacks, I guess you could say.

M: Yes. The first year the University was integrated there

were about...do you remember anybody who was there?

N*: I just remember one woman that was the first black student there.

C: Was her name Thelma?

N: I wouldn't know her first name. She was an Army wife. And after she finished there, she was the first one to graduate because I said I certainly was going to give her a gift. And I bought her a gift and when I went to her house to give it to her, they had gone to Germany for the next three years. Mrs. Toppin was one of them, Gwen Toppin.

M: There was really just a handful of black students there. And then when I got there, I think there were only 15 of us out of a student body of about 3,000 students. By the time I graduated there were about I guess 25 black students. I don't think there were much more than that. Then in my department, Music Department, there were approximately...I think there were more black students in the Music Department--not necessarily majoring in Music, but participating some way in Band or Orchestra or whatever. There were about seven or eight of us there.

C: Do you remember you all getting together at any time and talking about cases of discrimination on campus or anything?

M: No, no.

C: You felt, then, accepted completely?

*Mrs. Drusilla Nixon, Edna McIver's mother.

M: Now, I did. I didn't have any problems on campus from teachers or students either. I found that just one instance, one of my teachers who was just a very lovely person, he's dead now, and that was Mr. Ralph Briggs, and he was my piano teacher the whole time I was there. I had the feeling that this may have been the first time he had ever taught any black students and there were things that he wanted to know about black students. For instance, and this is the first, and I had kind of an inkling that he was learning a lot of things that he hadn't known before. One spring day it was just so gorgeous and we didn't have to wear even sweaters anymore, and I came in all bubbly and I said, "Oh my, isn't this a gorgeous day, and the weather is warm." And he said, "Oh, yes, it is beautiful." And he says, "By the way, I've always wanted to know, is it true that blacks like hot weather and fare better in hot weather than they do in cold weather?" And I said, "No." (Chuckles) I said, "That's not true." I said, "Some like warm weather and hot weather, and others can't stand it and like the cold." And I told him that we all come from different parts of the country, naturally, and are used to different things, so it really doesn't make any difference. So he said, "Oh, well I just wanted to know." And so there were people who just were curious, and this was their first time to go to school with black students or to teach

black students and to find out that they can be as brilliant in many subjects as they could be dumb, you know, as anybody else. You have your very smart students and...

C: Well, did you feel at all like you were a crusader or you were one of the first or anything like that?

M: No, not really. I think for me, my upbringing was so different than many young black students in that in my family, from the time I was a baby, my mother and father had friends from all over the world who were literary people, who were artists, who were politicians, who were just in all walks of life, State Department representatives from other countries and all. For instance, a couple that my parents corresponded with all the time and who came, I guess they came a couple of times to visit, was the Secretary of the Interior of Norway, from Oslo, and they and their family came a couple times. And our house was just always full with all kinds of people. And then I grew up in a Mexican neighborhood, and then my mother had grown up speaking German and French, and so I just had such a growing up with all sorts of people and things. So I didn't feel like a fish out of water. But then I did have a sense that, gee, this is the first time. You know, everybody couldn't help but feel that way.

I think what made me a little uncomfortable is that...I never talked to Mama about this, but when I was growing up, every now and then, Mama would say, "Now always remember--people are looking at you and and you have to do your bery best, especially because you know, in this particular instance, you're the only black child." For instance, times that I played in recitals and some of the recitals were held at the Albuquerque Museum and like that, and that would make me so nervous, especially that idea. But I think as I grew older and going through college I got a little bit away from that, "Oh, I have to do this because," for some other reason other than, "I have to do this for me, not necessarily for what somebody else thinks," and like that.

The only other thing that really made me quite uncomfortable, and that's just me, was the year, and this was my senior year, I was elected to Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities. That was one of the most unhappy days of my whole life, because I always felt, and I had always been a very good student I felt, "Oh, my goodness, now I have to even to prove myself even more." And I thought, you know, no one else had ever talked to me about something like that. And over the years I have met other people that had been very good students growing up, and everybody very proud of them and, you know, you look for this

student to do more. And you feel inside yourself that, "Now here's something else that I have to go beyond," And I met a young lady this summer, good friend of our daughter's that's a freshman in college now, and she had been an honor student all her life; and that's one reason why she didn't accept going into the Honor's Program at the college where our daughter is because she said it scared her to death. She felt that now she would even have to prove more things. But that's the other thing, that really affected me.

C: Okay, I want to ask you one more thing. Did you travel with the band on trips?

M: Yes.

C: Did you have any experiences?

M: Yes, I sure did.

C: Okay, tell me about that.

M: One of the first times that we went, I think it may have been the only time that we went to someplace in Texas Was it Amarillo?

N: Arizona, it was Arizona. You went to Phoenix.

M: Yeah, but I didn't have any problems in Phoenix.

N: No, but it was Benson, don't you remember the little town coming home.

M: I kept thinking it was Amarillo. Anyway, we went on a trip for a big football game and stopped to get something to eat at one of the little restaurants

where the bus driver said, "This is a nice place to stop and we'll get something to eat." So one bus of kids went to one restaurant half a block away and the rest of us went in this one right here. And in the restaurant where we went there were about four of us black students in that restaurant, and we all sat down with everybody, you know--we were all good friends. And everybody orders and then the waitress turns and looks at me and I remember my friend I had grown up with, Billy Newman--we used to trade comic books when we were little--and said, "I'm terribly sorry, but we don't serve blacks in here." So we said, "All right. Thank you." And we got up and walked out and went on to the bus and turned around and looked, and the entire band had quietly gotten up and walked out, including Mr. Carrico (?). John Carrico was the director. He got up and walked out. In that one restaurant that was about easily 35 - 40 people, and I think some students who had gone down the road, I think they...did I tell you somebody had gone down there with them? Anyway, that little town just lost a lot of business. We didn't eat. And we said to them, "Oh, that's all right. Go ahead and have something to eat, 'cause it's going to be a long time." They said, "No, we're not. If you can't eat, then we won't eat." And no one ate, and they lost business.

N: Tell her about the sign on the board the next day at

school that said, "Forty meals for sale," 'cause they had already ordered and they got up and walked out and left all those meals they were preparing. (Chuckles)

M: But, you know, it just always was a good experience.

N: And then you were elected by the students--wasn't it the Most Valuable Band Member--during your senior year?

M: Oh, yeah. I was the Most Valuable Band Lady, and they also chose the Most Valuable Band Man. Oh, what is his name? I can see him right now, and I can hear him fussing. Boy, he could really fuss. An absolutely marvelous clarinetist, just marvelous. I've often wondered what he was doing now. He's a little older than the rest of us. I think he had already spent a couple years or so like that in the service.

Anyway, what else? What else do you want to know?

C: What else is in your memory right now that you can add?

M: Oh, I heard you talking about pranks.

C: Yes, tell me.

M: Now this particular professor was not my professor but I very well remember the day this happened. He was the only person that I can ever remember on campus that had one of those little cars that only had three wheels--you know, you open the whole front end and then get in? He taught on the third floor in the building that's right next to Magoffin Auditorium. It's one of the older buildings, and I think it may have been the Physics Building. Anyway,

It's one of those buildings, and I had friends that were able to rig up some type of pulley whereby they'd pulled his car up and got it through the window, or somehow or another they got it in there, and there was his car.

One other day, and this was the same professor, now this is something that he played on the rest of the class. With so many students using the stairwells, and all, and all of us leave class before the professor does and then he leaves class, when we get out, he's already down at the bottom of the hill, and we can't figure out how he does that--from the third floor." And come to find out what he did was...now how did he do this? He went out through the window. Somehow or another, it seemed to me there was a pipe or something on the side of the building, and he would go out through the window and shimmy down the pipe and he was on his way, to cut time down. But, a lot of little funny things like that. But that one about hoisting his car up and getting it inside, the classroom.

C: Were they winning the football games when you were a student?

M: No. You know, when I think back on this, I think this is really terrible, and that was quite impolite of the rest of us. But they used to sell the Sunday paper late Saturday evening at the football games. Thinking back on it, I wondered why this was allowed in the first place,

but somebody would come and they would sell the Sunday paper late. And we'd sit up, and rather than watching the football game and then in between playing rah rah songs and all, we'd read the funny papers. And it was really quite boring. We'd lose games by a long shot.

C: That meant you were having more fun in the band than the football team was having. (Laughter)

M: I remember talking about times, since this was the first time that black students had gone to UTEP and back then I didn't have...I had the courage of my convictions, but I had never been a young lady that had the courage to speak out and say, "No, I don't believe in this. I don't want to do this," etc., etc. I would just always keep very quiet. And I've often wished that I had said something, especially now when an incident that I'm going to tell you about has come up, I think it was at Old Mis. We had the huge band show where we utilize all of the high school bands, when we had, oh, several rehearsals with everybody there. And one of the things that we were supposed to do is to play "Dixie" and salute the Confederate flag and, oh, all this stuff, and a lot of confederate stuff going all over. And for black people, the waving of the Confederate flag and all is likened to the waving of the Nazi flag for Jews, and none of us wanted at all to play Dixie just hated it. And John Carriod...and he, you know, I don't blame anybody, because sometimes people just don't know these things,

are not sensitive towards just little things like that, and he kept saying, "It doesn't sound right. Play it with all your heart like you have your heart in it."

And I thought, "Good grief, how can we do that." But it was just a handful of us black students in the band. That's the only other thing, that and one more thing.

C: Okay, let me check my tape.

/PAUSE/

M: One more thing. When I did my student teaching, this was my senior year in college, I couldn't do my high school student teaching at an El Paso high school. Even though the high schools were integrated, the teaching staffs were not integrated, and so I had to do my high school student teaching out at an elementary and junior high school, which was Douglas, the school that I had grown up in. I have always felt if I had been the now me then, I would have really fussed and talked someone into doing something about my student teaching in the high school. But all of the Black students who were education majors, if they were secondary education majors, they had to do their secondary student teaching in the one predominantly black school in the city and that was Douglas. And I always felt that Mr. Eidbo, who was my student teaching advisor from the Music Department, I always felt that he could have done a little more than just accept the fact that I couldn't teach in the high school. I think a lot of people just

hadn't had any practice in being assertive about many things.

C: You were talking about the "now me" and the "now me" would stand up a little more and speak her mind.

M: Oh, yes.

C: Do you think that it's because you're older, or maybe the effects of the Civil Rights movement in the sixties or both?

M: I think it's because I'm older and I'm more settled in the ways that I think. I've got my head more together. I know exactly what I like, exactly what I don't like. I have developed the attitude that if I were something, if I do something, if I say something that I strongly have thought about--if somebody else doesn't like it, that's not my problem, it's theirs. And so I'm very comfortable with that feeling. Consequently, I am more able to say exactly what I feel. Now, once in a while I'm a little shy about getting up in big groups; but if something's not right then I am more assertive--oh, much more assertive than I ever used to be.

And I think for most young people, even those that have been used to speaking their minds and all, they still have growing up times which I feel is affected more by being away from home and away from Mama and Daddy's influence and away from friends' influence.

And my big time for growing up was when I left El Paso and went to Germany, and that's really so far, far, far away from anything that I had known, and all brand new friends and entirely different surroundings. And that was the time when I realized that I did have ideas of my very own, that even Mama had disagreed with a lot of my ideas. (Laughter) So, I'm even now more comfortable if I say, "Mama, you know how I feel about that, and that's that," (Laughs)

C: When you graduated, do you remember where the graduation ceremonies were held?

M: Isn't that awful, why did you ask me that? (Laughs)

C: Do you remember, Mrs. Nixon?

N: Yes. It was out in the football field. We sat in the bleachers.

M: I don't remember that.

C: At old Kidd Field, before they built the Sun Bowl.

N: No, I believe it was the Sun Bowl.

M: It was in the football stadium? You know, I don't even remember that.

N: Yes, that's where it was.

M: Oh, my goodness. Are you sure?

N: Yeah. The band sat on one side. We were over on the other.

M: Isn't it awful. I don't even remember.

C: Do you remember any certain musical programs that you

were in in college that you were particularly proud of your performance or you were embarrassed by what you did?

N: The opera.

M: Oh, yeah. I enjoyed that very much, more than anything.

C: What was it, which opera?

M: I guess it was my sophomore year in college we did "The Merry Widow," and then my junior year in college "El Trovatore."

N: No it wasn't it was Faust.

M: No, I wasn't in Faust. I helped with the scenery and all for Faust. It was either "La Traviata" or "El Trovatore." And I remember Dr. Thor asking me if I would paint some of the scenery, and I said, "Of course." I just loved that, so I said, "Sure." And this particular time was the first time that I was given a job to paint a really large piece of scenery all by myself. And it was a huge stone wall that was partially destroyed, with a huge arch in it.

Well, I was given a sheet of paper and it says it has to be so wide and has to be so tall and all. And I had always had a good eye for sizes and doing things without taking out a tape measure and marking off my inches and feet and all, and I painted the whole thing without measuring. It was perfect. (Laughs)
I was so proud. And I hadn't even taken any classes

in painting or designing, but I had always known that even for public speaking, for signing, for acting, you had to exaggerate some things. If you wanted a certain feeling, you'd have to exaggerate that particular feeling so that you would emote that feeling to the furthest corners of the theater. So I thought, it stands to reason, with such a huge state and with such bright lights you have to exaggerate stones, and I even did that. I exaggerated the corners of these stones with real black, black paint, and then I put other colors in there and all. And when it came out it was perfect. And I surprised myself. I think I surprised Thor, although he must have had a lot of faith in me when he said, "Paint this." (Chuckles)

C: He knew you could do it.

M: Yeah. But, of course, you know, Dr. Thormesgard was the first and only person I have ever known to have hypnotic powers really and truly. I would go to class and I would think to myself, if I see Thor walk down this hall towards me with his mouth open--'cause usually when you ran into Thor he talked you into doing something--I said to myself, "I am not going to do it. I'm just going to tell him, "Dr. Thor I don't have time. I am sorry. You will have to find somebody else." And lo and behold, there's Thor. Next thing I knew, I would say, "Oh gee, Thor, I would love to do that. When do you want it done?" And that's how I got talked into Music Education major rather than Applied Music, just like that /snaps fingers/ I changed my mind. And Thor talked me out of it just immediately.

And I was a very good typist and then I liked to do office work, and every time I saw Thor walking down the hall, he'd say, "Edna, I need you to type thus and such," And I'd think to myself, "Oh, I can't do it. I just have to tell him I can't do it." But lo and behold, say, in the matter of five minutes, I was in his office just working away. And that's the first paying job I ever had, and that's when I got my Social Security number, because I found out that in order to get my first paycheck from the college I had to have a Social Security number. So that's the first time I got my Social Security number and my first real job.

C: You worked in the office in the Music Department?

M: In the Music Department. And it wasn't a full time job. Sometimes it felt like a full time job, especially when Thor had loads and loads of stuff to get caught up with, but it wasn't really a full time job. But I did get paid.

C: What other professors at UTEP or just personnel had an impact on you?

M: Hmm. I don't know. I guess I was just kind of attracted to Thor because he had such a forceful personality and very different person. I enjoyed all of my Music professors, I really did.

So far as an emotional impact, very spiritual impact, there's only one other person at the University and he was never my professor, but I think he was head of the Philosophy

Department. And he was /an/ older man, then; I don't know if he's still living and I don't even remember what his name was. But you could probably /find out/. I would go to some of his lectures when he would give a lecture for anyone who wanted to come and listen. And this wouldn't be a part of class time, it would just be part of a small lecture series and all. Oh, he was the most marvelous person. His philosophical outlook on-- at least then I felt--it was on just people and what we're here for and life in general and all. And he was about the first person other than my mother that I had ever heard talk about the Bible in relationship to science and history, and such things as what makes a miracle, and that the miracles are miracles because they happen when they are most needed. Like for instance, the manna that fell from heaven, what it was was all the sap that had crystallized on the trees, and when the people needed nourishment the most, that's when the wind blew and blew this, and that's what made it a miracle.

And he was the one person that when I would see him across campus, I would just get this marvelous glow and I would think to myself, my goodness, this is just like in the movies when people see Jesus for the first time and they see halos and stars and the music starts playing. Do you know that really happened to me, it really did. All I had to do was see him walk down the campus and he'd smile and say hello and I'd smile and say hello. Now, I

don't know if it's because I was so young. Remember when I talked to you, telling you about that?

N: I remember, but I can't remember his name. I can't remember any that taught me up there.

M: Oh, yeah. Now Mama was in school.

C: When did you go to school there,

N: When she was a freshman. And she used to holler clear across campus, "Hey, Mama!" (Laughter) And all the kids would turn around and look.

C: Well, what courses did you take?

N: Well, I took Creative Writing from Mr. Tisdale, or something like that. He's a writer there. He was a writer, I don't know if he's still living or not. And then I took Spanish, then I took violin from Abraham Chavez.

C: Oh, did you?

M: Now you know my father delivered Abraham Chavez and his brothers. And I think he has, what, two brothers? And was his family physician. Isn't that something else.

N: And the mayor that we had, what was his name, the Mexican mayor that we had?

C: We had a Salazar, Ray Salazar?

N: He delivered all his family.

C: Abraham Chavez doesn't direct all the time anymore.

N: Anymore?

C: A little occasionally--maybe one symphony performance a year. Somebody told me he wasn't in real good health.

M: When he was up here, I tried to see him backstage and he

had gone already, that quickly. But he didn't look very well. Oh, Charlie Simpson--he was there and I have his address now and I really need to write to him. You didn't know Charile Simpson. He was with the Music Department and he's now in business for himself and he does video tapes for high schools. This is what I understand from one of the high school band professors, that he does video tapes for ball games and like that, and for the University, and has his video company there. But he was one of my Voice teachers. And he had such energy, my goodness gracious. He would wear you out with, you know, just to watch him, he had such energy. And he was just so much fun. I just had a very good time.

C: It sounds like your parents instilled in you a thirst for knowledge and that's why you enjoyed going to UTEP.

M: Yeah. You know it makes a difference how you're raised. No matter who you are it makes a difference how you're raised in that if you're raised to be able to adjust to certain situations and all, then you do; and if you're sensitive and not too many things make you happy you don't find enjoyment in too many things, then you don't adjust or you don't have a good time.

N: I remember when Aunt Edna was with us and we were going to something out at UTEP, I think it was one of the operas or something. It was before it was integrated, and so she kept saying, "Leave the children home with me, don't drag them out." And my husband would say, "This is part of their

education." And we'd go to New York in the fall, around the last of September and October, the time that the opera season was beginning. And I have a daughter that's older than Edna and she's a Down Syndrome child, and she got so that she would recognize all the arias. When you'd hear it on T.V., we'd say, "What is that?" And she'd say, "That's 'Carmen'." And we had seen "Carmen" and "Carmen Jones," and so she'd always say that's "Carmen Jones," or what ever it was. And then when we took a cruise as far as Venezuela, we made twelve stops through the West Indies and that kind of thing, meeting people. The people that were on our ship, we later visited them in New York. And I think that has a whole lot to do with /it/.

M: Now that is my first love--people. People can make me so angry and all, but I love people. I just love them, all kinds.

N: You can learn from all kinds. There in El Paso I had some friends that were much older than I was and they were people that hadn't had the advantage of schooling, but there was something about them, I could always learn something, and people used to say, "Why are you so thick with Mrs. so-and-so?" And I'd say, "But there's something to learn from everybody."