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Interview no. 670

Myrtle Ball

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Myrtle E. Ball
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 28, 1983
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 670
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 670

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former Speech and Drama professor at UTEP, 1929 - 1958.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

How she and her husband came to El Paso, and first teaching experiences in the city; experiences at the College of Mines, including stage productions.

Length of interview: 45 minutes Length of transcript: 16 pages

Myrtle E. Ball
By Rebecca Craver
October 28, 1983

B: That bothered me very much. At one of those panels, they had us lending him \$4000. We hadn't seen \$4000 in years. (Laughs) They flattered us, you know, and so I can't complain. (Laughs) But I just thought, Well, now, where in the dickens did that start. And another one really wrote the book and he told about the time that the College Players went down to the Cortez and climbed up there and got on the edge of the roof and advertised our show, which they did, but he said they were arrested for it. Well, he was right. We were there but we weren't arrested. (Laughs)

C: What year was that Mrs. Ball, do you remember?

B: That's my trouble, honey, that's my trouble.

C: In the thirties?

B: I think it was, "You Can't Take It With You," but I'm not sure. But people were telling us not to jump.

C; Well, what brought you to El Paso? You and your husband came?

B: Oh, yes. We came, I was teaching at Montezuma College in Las Vegas and the college was actually on the last throes of going down. They couldn't support it. And it was the most interesting old place. If you use anything use this, it doesn't reflect on me any but it reflects on the country. The building embraced the whole college. It was a huge old castle of an oil syndicate. They used to come there to bring their...whoever, and

most of the housing, there was only one building at that time, we had an auditorium that was built onto that and it's a deeply religious Baptist school, you know. Well, I lived in Las Vegas and my husband taught at the college there. I'm going to shock you now, I can't remember what the new name of the college is.

C: New Mexico Highlands.

B: Yeah, Highlands, Highlands University, that's what it is. He taught there and I graduated from there and we decided to leave. I was trying to think, did we get the job? He got the job before, I think, we decided. He applied for a state job at Las Cruces. It was a state job, it wasn't a Las Cruces job, but it was located in Las Cruces and he had to go before the Legislature and show them his credentials that he had taught agriculture in college, was teaching it there at Highlands University, but he hadn't taught it in high school. So, we sold our furniture to another professor and his wife. The professor promptly died and we never got anything for it. (Laughs)

C: Oh no.

B: On the way there we had a terrible wreck on the way back to Illinois where we both originated and we went in crippled with that poor car because /we/ didn't have enough money to restore it, but we came on here and my husband said, "Well, I'll just go to the public schools and see if I can get a job." And we walked in when...now I'm forgetting his name and I know him so well and love him. Who was the

man who died here so long ago?

C: Who was here a long time, was it Dean Puckett?

B: No, he was at the high school.

C: I don't know.

B: Well, it'll come to me.

C: Okay.

B: And he walked in and he said, "Now I don't have any credentials with me because I didn't know I was going to have to." They had somebody in their school that they wanted to have the job and they proceeded to make an issue of the fact he hadn't taught high school agriculture. And there we were with three children, a broken down car and no jobs, and I had resigned from Montezuma. But this man said to my husband, he said, "I think I'm a fairly good judge of a man. You don't need any credentials." And he went to El Paso High School and taught for a year. In the meantime, at mid-year I found an opening at Austin where I could teach sixth grade Speech, so I took two or three little offsprings. I won two or three events. Well, at the end of the year...both my husband and I and Miss Egg and her friend, Miss Gregory.

C: Oh, Gladys Gregory.

B: Gladys Gregory, and Miss Long were all paid by the public schools for a couple of years and we went to the college. That was in '29, and you know there was a very few buildings out there at that time.

C: Where did you teach your classes? What building?

B: Wherever they weren't occupied, I taught them, and I had one class in that little place, I'm sure it's been pointed out, I'm sure you'd remember it. But we used to get cokes and then have to go outside to drink them, because there wasn't room, on the north side of the Old Main.

C: Oh, that little building back there.

B: Yeah. It probably wasn't opened at the time you were there. Well, it would be full of tables. It was full of tables. And you can imagine teaching Speech with all that between it. And one day, I'm in a talkative mood, God help you, one day, I don't want to name a name here, well, one of the young girls came in who later became a wife of a freshman and she got up on that table, just came in and sat down on the table. That was her entrance, and she got on that table and whirled around like this. She had on a short skirt and frilly and nooo stockings! Well, I think that for once I was so non-plussed I didn't say anything because I'd never heard of anybody that didn't wear stockings at that time, in public. And everybody was shocked, even the student. But I think I had them out on the steps one time they had no place to go, and I used the other auditorium over there that they use for, I don't know what they use it for now, great big thing.

C: Downtown on Santa Fe?

B: No, up at the college.

C: Oh, the Magoffin?

B: It wasn't Magoffin. It wasn't built then. There was another building, I don't know whether it's still there or not, over close to the engineering people.

C: Oh really?

B: And it was even worse than the others. But I can truly say that I don't believe there ever, I had never known as fine students and the quality of students as I had in those years. They worked their fool head off and I worked my hair grey. This is the only preparation I made for you. I didn't intend to tell that. But I sponsored the College Players, the Forensic Society, which was public speaking, but outstanding public speakers, and that Alpha Psi Omega, which was the national drama organization, and we had a radio program called Poetic Reverence every Sunday where we read poems. In the meantime, I taught my regular classes and sometimes, nearly always had a night class.

C: How many classes did you teach? What was full load?

B: Four and five.

C: And you had three children at home? How did you manage?

B: I guess the Lord was with me, and I got not as much as I'm paying my housekeeper, who cannot speak a word of English and doesn't know how to leave the house. I have to go around and straighten everything, and I

didn't get it all straightened today. She cleans well, I must give her credit, but she cleans only once a week--everything. That's the only time she cleans well and it never occurred to her to leave books or anything else orderly, you know. And she thinks I'm real mean to insist or to try to insist... (Laughter)

C: Oh, dear.

B: Well, I was trying to think of something that was aside from me at all that would help. Actually, you can see that I was so much immersed in what I was doing that I didn't have much time for anything else.

C: Were there other husband-wife teams on the faculty?

B: Oh, now there's an episode for you. You must have this, because it's a good one. During the war, I guess it was in the, about '38 or '40, in there, they passed a law prohibiting husband and wife from teaching and there wasn't anybody out there but the Quinns and the Balls that were husband and wife. And Mary and I were out of a job, so I went out and taught at Loretto for two years. I've always been rather glad I had that experience because I knew so little about the Catholic schools, but it was hard. I used to remember coming home from that and coming up Montana and the sun would be so strong in my eyes, I came up about four or five o'clock in the afternoon. And Mary sold life insurance.

C: Then, did they change the law and you were rehired?

B: Yes, yes. But somebody had accidentally slipped that in there. I don't think we were important enough to fire. It might have been, but we chose not to think so. There was the husband and wife out at Texas A & M, lots of them. The wives were secretaries and so on and then another episode that was rather interesting in an odd way. You know, the public schools don't have, they have social security, don't they? Do you know?

C: I believe they have some kind of teacher retirement.

B: They have teachers' retirement but not social security. Well, you see, when we got it, they didn't aim for us to have it, it was an accident. And it was named for some other division of citizens where they made as little money as we did. (Laughter) Anyway, when it came out we still didn't know about it, we hadn't been notified. And my husband, I don't know if he ever told this to anybody at all or if people would believe it even. But he saw that and he said, "My goodness, why that means us, too," and everybody just laughed at it. And it's been such a boon. People that retire now, they can live very well because they can retire on just about what they were getting from teaching, and of course it's increased many fold and I rejoice in every bit of it and I'm that way about the stage and all the paraphernalia that Milton Leech has. He's done a

beautiful job with that, gathering that up and there's not many in El Paso that's as good as that, I mean in Texas, that's as good as that.

C: Tell me about some early productions over at the college that you were really proud of.

B: Oh, "Our Town" stands out above all of them.

C: And where was that put on? Downtown at the Scottish Rite Temple, or where was it?

B: Scottish Rite.

C: You used that building quite a bit?

B: When we could afford it. You see, we had to pay our own way, and we had to make our own way. We had nothing apportioned for us or any of the arts, really. And "Our Town," I guess we had had just one rehearsal in it because we had to pay for the rehearsal and we couldn't afford it, and it was a rather memorable thing. At the end of the year we went to a drama, used to have a drama one-act play of all the state of Texas. This was at Lubbock. It was in Lubbock and I had another play, a one-act play that Thornton Wilder had written. It was a one-act play. It was, oh I declare, I should have thought this over before you came. I hope it will come to me, and anyway she was just dressed up like a man and they were pretending they were going on their first automobile trip, you know, father and mother and two children and it was all so new and they were all so excited. So they had four chairs there and they sat there, and they stopped to get

gas and Donavie was selling the gas, you know. And after we got there I had written Paramount and asked someone, that I thought Donavie was good material, and would they be interested? And I knew a man at Paramount and he said, "I'll be there," and three of them came, but I don't know why I didn't think of this before I was over there, but we borrowed... I got permission, Lord only knows, I didn't pay them anything. I just begged. I said, "Will you give me five minutes time for Donavie to play that 'goodbye world' scene?" I said, Now there are three movie scouts here and it means something to all of us if they think she's any good." So, Donavie was poor, as were we all, so we borrowed a white dress, I've got her picture I'll show you, and she was perfectly heaven _____. And Twentieth Century was there and Paramount and she got two offers of screentests and she went to Paramount and that was our night. It made up for everything that happened. The University of Texas came. They had two big, what do you call things where they carry a lot of things?

C: Pickup truck?

B: They brought all their sets and everything down there, and we won first in the one-act play, and Donavie won the first woman _____, and one of the others, I've forgotten which one it was, won too. So they won the boys', the girls' and the play, the one-act play.

C: Well, what a thrill.

B: And we went to someplace to get something to eat after it was over and we had a big cup which has disappeared, don't know where in the world it went. We didn't have anyplace to put it and we filled that full of coke because I was a nondrinker, you know, and I didn't allow any drinking. They drank probably when I wasn't around, but they didn't drink when I was around. And we sat and everybody drank out of that, and then when we started home we were all just flabbergasted by such good luck, you know, all at once we looked at Donavie and I says, "What's the matter with you Donavie you're all breaking out." She had the measles. (Laughter)

C: Oh no. Oh no. Well, I've heard tell about one time when you had a class over in the museum and the co-eds had some kind of a posture...

B: Oh, that posture contest. I had forgotten.

C: Yes.

B: I inaugurated that and it was a beautiful thing.

C: Tell me about it.

B: Well, it was over in the museum. They had to go clear down all those steps and up. They had lights, all colored lights, electricity. It was lighted beautifully and the girls, of course, had on evening clothes and later we had escorts. Then came the war and everything tightened up, so we had to stop.

C: Well, after the war, did you have the posture contest?

B: No, it never was revived.

C: It wasn't?

B: After that. So much water has gone under the bridge, you know, and we'd had two or three exchanges of presidents.

C: Which of the administrations do you think helped Drama and Speech the most?

B: Well, I thought Dr. Elkins was one of the great ones. My electric bill was something fierce, but Dr. Elkins was very helpful. I never was mistreated by anybody. I wouldn't want to say...we've had some mighty good men as presidents, but I hated to see Elkins leave, my goodness I hated to see him leave. We had some very strong teachers too.

C: Well, when you joined the faculty, had they been teaching Speech before you came or did you begin all of it?

B: As far as I know, I began it. I have a feeling, very iffy feeling about that, that somebody had taught us one term, but I don't know. Now, afterwards, you know, when I went out to the girl's school and taught, Clarice Jones came and took over the Speech and Drama for the two years and when I came back I was just one of the girls. She was wonderful. She's one of the best friends I've got in the world. And it could easily have not been happy for me. Well, it wasn't happy, exactly, but I didn't blame her because she was a good teacher. Good teacher! And we

officed together for ten years and then I retired, in '58. That's what surprised me so much when they remembered to make me Emeritus when I was ninety. So I said, "People have longer memories _____." I think the best people in the world are here. I never, never had wanted to settle down till I came here. I went to South Dakota when I was 17 years old and taught in an isolated school and had to live in the schoolhouse and had a big base burner, and if that went out, it was just too bad.

C: Bet it was cold!

B: Coold as it could be!

C: What did you think of the weather in El Paso when you got here?

B: I thought it was heaven on earth and I still think it.

I could do with a little less rain right now, but...(Laughter)

C: Well, the sun's come out today.

B: But actually you can say all you want to, there is less to complain of here than almost anyplace in the country. We don't have earthquakes. We don't have cyclones. I saw one way up somewhere, but it was going somewhere else, it didn't mean to stop here. (Laughter)

C: Well, do you remember any bad dust storms or rain showers that played havoc with some of your productions that you might have had outdoors?

B: I never did.

C: No. Well good.

B: That's rather strange, isn't it?

C: Since you were in charge of the Drama and Speech, did you have to produce the commencements or have a band in some of the pageants at school or the dances or anything?

B: No, I, sometimes I had to chaperone. They used to have chaperones.

C: Did they have dances quite often?

B: But I got out of that as much as I could because I didn't have any extra time, because I was either rehearsing or presenting. We used to have very interesting meetings of the whole faculty and their families. We were so small we could do it.

C: Where would you have these gatherings?

B: Well, after they built the girls' dormitory, we had them over there. And we used to have plays and programs and we knew each other very well, and as I said before, we loved each other. Not everybody, maybe. (Chuckles) But there were some, oh, some fine people and they're dying out one by one. Still fine people left, I don't mean that they're all gone, but devoted to their school. I say publicly that I have lived, and I would like to die in the shadow of that school, because it has meant so much to me, and because one thing that they remembered me after all those years. (Laughter) You know, this, to go back to this Montezuma thing, I don't know whether you want to bring that in at all or not, it's now a

World College.

C: I heard that on the news.

B: And it's under the, I don't know the word to use, supervision, I believe is the word, of Prince Charles. And he was there last year, I was not well at all, and I'd planned to go because I've always wanted to see him and there are two students from practically all the world dominions, two from each country, now I don't think every country's there. I don't know whether Cuba is or not. They should be, and it's only a two-year course now, and they are rebuilding the whole thing and I plan to go this year, if I make it.

C: Oh, I hope you can get up there.

B: I'd like to go back over there and see it. It's straight up against the mountain.

C: I've seen it.

B: Oh, have you?

C: Uh huh, it's beautiful.

B: Oh, it's a wonderful place and the hot springs. They have hot springs there and I'm one of the few teachers left living. I keep up with them, and one of the best pictures I ever had was in their yearbook. Now I'm keeping you too long.

C: No, you're not. I love it.

B: And I can't think of anything else to say.

C: Well, how would you compare the students in the thirties with the students in the fifties? You said in the thirties

you thought they were very good students.

B: Well, I can't say they were any better. It just happened that that early group, of course _____ was still _____. There's so much talent. Now, in my classes I've had countless lawyers, four preachers, four people that spent their life on T.V. And I just located him the other day and I haven't contacted him yet. He's with Columbia and I've never seen him since he left, and he was one of the good ones in the play _____. Well, can you think of something that would fill in the space that you are really interested in?

C: Well, do you remember any pranks that were played by the students or tricks they played on you or?

B: What?

C: Did the students ever play a trick on you?

B: No.

C: Never? Do you remember the green line and all that stuff on St. Patrick's Day that engineers would do?

B: Yeah.

C: Tell me about that.

B: I don't know about it.

C: Well, I sure do thank you for sharing your afternoon with me.

B: Well, now will you delete this, please because I swear I forgot that you were going to _____.

C: Well, I'll tell you what we're going to do, Mrs. Ball.

We're going to send you a transcript for this tape.

They're going to type it out.

B: Oh, that would be fine.

C: And we'll send it to you and all of this is your words and you're free to edit it.

B: Well, I'm very sensitive about what's in the paper about me. I've been over-exposed (Laughter), and that's what I told the reporter the other day down there. I said, "Please, I don't want anything in the paper about me because people get tired of it."