

10-28-1983

Interview no. 671

Ruth Brown McCluney

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Ruth Brown McCluney by Rebecca Craver & Vicki L. Ruiz, 1983, "Interview no. 671," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Ruth Brown McCluney
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver & Vicki L. Ruiz
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 21, 1983
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 671
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 671

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Student at the College of Mines, 1916-1919.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Recollections of the College of Mines in the early years.

Length of interview: 35 minutes Length of transcript: 14 pages

Ruth Brown McCluney
by Vicki L. Ruiz and Rebecca Craver
October 21, 1983

C: I'd like to start out and ask you why you enrolled in the School of Mines way back in 1916?

M: Well, I was sixteen years old when I graduated from El Paso High School. At that time, of course, there was just one high school, and I was one of forty-nine graduates in 1916. That's how small El Paso was. My parents didn't want me to go away to school because I was so young. My father read in the paper along in the summer that the Texas legislature had decided that this school would be open to women, I suppose because it was so far away from everything else, I don't know. But he contacted the Dean, Dean Worrell, at the College of Mines, and he said as far as he knew there was no objection to girls going. There was another girl in my high school graduating class who didn't have any way to go away to school and so she decided she'd go too. We enrolled the 1st of September. But she didn't like it and I think she dropped out at the end of the first semester. She was not a personal friend; I just knew who she was. And as far as I know she went somewhere else or didn't go anywhere; I just don't know. But they couldn't find her. They tried to find her here at the Alumni Office. Well, at any rate, my first semester out there on the campus, which was just east of Fort Bliss was pretty difficult because they enrolled me in all of these engineering subjects. They did have an English teacher. They hadn't had one until that year, so I did take English from a man who was not an engineer. But I had physics from Cap Kidd, who is a legend in this school and since I had not had it in high school, I had a rough time.

/PAUSE/

...I don't think they discovered who set the fire. As I remember it happened on a weekend /and/ there was no one around to give the signal. But when we came back to school, on Monday morning, there was nothing left except a lot of rocks and pillars of the Main building.

R: So the College Mines was first at the Military Institute?

M: Yes, at one of the buildings. And that is the reason of having the campus where it is today, because they had to do something else. Well, they patched up the building that was built for a boys' dormitory, or they were using for a boys' dormitory. Of course, they didn't have any girls, they didn't need anything else. And Dean and Mrs. Worrell had an apartment in that same building, but they had it switched around and put classrooms in some of the rooms. And our chemistry lab was in a temporary building that they erected, it was just mostly sheet iron, I think. And we continued there the rest of the year--under those conditions, which were rough. But I was so involved in my classes that it didn't bother me. I don't remember feeling sorry for myself or anything else. But along the 1st of April war was declared in Europe. And we lost some of our students--they just couldn't wait to go down and enlist.

R: Did you socialize on campus?

M: I had dates with some of the boys that I had known before. Now, Tom Clements was one of the students; he was one that enlisted in the Navy. I knew him in high school and I'll never forget a date I had with him. He wanted to go see one of the D.W. Griffiths films downtown; I think it was Birth of a Nation, I could be wrong. Anyway, when he came to get me and we got on a streetcar

to ride to town. He brought a box of candy. We sat there and ate almost all that box of candy that afternoon. [Chuckles] That's how kids are. But he left. I did see his picture in one of the Nova issues. I know he's still around, and I hope I get to see him tomorrow. And another boy or man I had some dates with was named Mann Prettyman, but he was from Virginia and he graduated in 1919. He was a little too proper for a West Texas girl. [Interviewers chuckle] But then they brought a whole lot of recruits in for the war, you know, to train them at Fort Bliss. And I found me a soldier, and so I wasn't interested in any of the college boys anymore. I just sat around and cried because I thought he was going overseas. [Laughs]

C: You mentioned the streetcar, riding the streetcar, is that the way you got to school?

M: That's the way I got to school. We lived in Alta Vista, I believe they still call it Alta Vista, on Hueco Street and the streetcar went to Fort Bliss and that's where it ended, so I had to walk. It was over half a mile, past all the stables! It was a cavalry post, 7th cavalry. Very odoriferous. [Laughter] Someone asked me if I was ever in trouble going through the military post because I walked the whole distance. A lot of the time there were other students on the streetcar who went with me. There were just two automobiles out there at the campus. One belonged to Cap Kidd, who had an old Hupmobile, and one of the students had a car. That was it.

C: But tell me about Cap Kidd.

M: He was an institution, I guess you've heard about that, around

here. He was a fine engineer--that was his profession, [a] civil engineer. I don't think he disliked me, but I had the feeling all the time that he probably wished I weren't there.

C: Why?

M: Because I was a girl!

C: Oh, I see.

M: And I would've just died before I would've asked him to explain anything to me, 'cause I was really kind of afraid of him. And I passed the physics course and then the next year I took calculus from him--advanced math. But his personality was so unusual, and I couldn't imagine anybody ever opposing him on anything. And yet he loved those boys, he loved the school, he'd do anything to promote the school!

C: Do you remember any football games?

M: They were just beginning to have some. Cap Kidd didn't rest till he got football going and I'm sure the first of it was not too good, but that mostly happened after I left.

R: What about going out on a date? Did your parents have to meet the young man, did you have to have a chaperone?

M: Oh, yes. To go back a little bit, there were four boys who went to Asbury Methodist Church up on Hueco Street, and that's where we all belonged. Now, I was still in high school, and one of them was enamored of my best friend, and you may've heard of Speedy Nelson, who taught geology here. Well, that was who it was--and his wife--Faye. He married her later and I played for the wedding. She was my best pal in high school. Speedy came down to the church because she belonged there and he brought his friends with him. There were three of them who graduated in

1916 before I even went to school, and one of them was Clyde Ney, who invited me to go to the first banquet that was held by any of the mining students. I don't even remember where it was held. And Clyde asked my father, now, he didn't ask me at first if he could take me to the banquet. There was a rule in my family that I could not date until I was sixteen. Well, this happened about a month before I was sixteen, because I was a senior in high school. And so a special dispensation was held and Clyde explained that he was engaged to a girl in Louisiana and I would be perfectly safe with him. So I really was thrilled. Now, another boy came, enrolled the year before M had who came with these three to the church. And you may know Fred Bailey, he's one of the Exes. Well, he was a good friend of ours and went to the same church. We were all in a bunch together. My mother took him aside and told him that her daughter was too young and would he look after her out there when I started to go to school because it was so, you know, I wouldn't have other girls around. So Fred I guess did a good job because nothing ever happened to me. [Laughter]

R: So he was very protective of you.

M: I'm so anxious to see him. Mr. Peak said he just didn't know whether he would be around tomorrow or not. I know his wife, he's married to an El Paso girl. I knew her in high school, and she isn't well at all, so he may not come. Well, anyway I had that introduction to go into college, so it was not strange to me.

R: What about the soldier, did your parents know him before?

You said you found a soldier at Fort Bliss, was that different in terms of your parents?

M: Well, yes, but he came down to the church.

R: Oh, that's good.

M: He was a preacher's son from Illinois, I think it was, and lonesome. And my mother kind of took everybody under her wing. And I went with him quite a while, but finally we went different paths.

C: Tell me about what kind of clothes you wore to school?

M: Middies and pleated skirts. And every Sunday I had to iron those pleated skirts, starch them and then wet them real wet and pin them to the ironing board with pins to hold the pleats down and iron those pleates till they got dry. That's a job!

R: It sounds like it.

M: But that was the uniform and if you were real stylish you got them tailor-made, otherwise, you just went to the store and bought them.

C: Do you remember what kind of shoes you had on?

M: I just couldn't tell you to save my life.

C: 'Cause you had to do that walking.

M: I think most of the time we had straps across that fastened, and then, of course, in the winter we wore high top shoes. I don't remember wearing over shoes, I did when I went up to Lawrence, Kansas, where I nearly froze to death, but not here. But these things, are so dim one doesn't remember.

C: Now, you mentioned the soldiers coming in during World War I, what other kind of activities went on around here during the war, was there Red Cross work?

- M: Well, everybody took a class. They had a doctor come in and they did teach a course in first aid and all of that. Dr. Jenness, I believe his name was. Yes, we were all patriotic and learned to roll bandages and all that sort of thing.
- C: Were there more girl students during the war?
- M: There weren't until along in the second year I was at school. Now, you see, they were building the new campus, there were three buildings. They hurt my feelings by saying "Old" Main, it was the Main Building! [chuckles] And they would finish up one floor of a building and then they'd let you come out for the classes [in] that building. Otherwise during the second year, we met in an old Jewish Synagogue. It was the Rabbi who sort of instigated this college idea--Community College I think they called it? And then's when the girls came in. What he wanted and what Mr. Huey who had been my high school principal wanted, was to make a teachers' college out of this whole business and control it. There was quite a hassle over that, I think. I learned that later, I didn't know it then. But at any rate, they opened up this college section for a full college degree course--but most of it was education courses. I took the education courses--in fact, I got my certificate while it was still the School of Mines.
- C: Well, I remember reading somewhere that you worked at...
- M: Well, the reason I stayed the third year was because Mr. Frank Seamon wanted me to take a job as the freshman lab instructor and lab assistant. He had more work than he could do, so they offered me thirty dollars a month and that was too good to pass up. So I ended up taking a harum-scarum course of most everything I could find [chuckles], in order to get more hours.

I took Assaying as a chemistry course. And then when I transferred to the University of Kansas to finish up my work, I had to take two hard chemistry courses all year in order to finish up my chemistry hours so I'd have enough to graduate.

C: But it never occurred to you to be a mining engineer?

M: Oh, no, no, I couldn't. Mining engineering students had to go through field work in summer. I had no desire to be a mining engineer. /chuckles/ But /when/ I look back on it, though, I think Mr. Seamon's influence on me was the thing, because fortunately he saw that some of the work I did was good. In fact, twenty years later when World War II started I went to work at General Dynamics at Fort Worth in the chemistry lab, using the techniques that Mr. Seamon had taught me. But most of my adult work was teaching, I taught high school. But that, of course, is another chapter. Just ask me anything you want.

C: What do you remember about Dean Worrell and his wife?

M: Not very much. Of course, Dean Worrell started the whole new types of buildings. And Mrs. Worrell, I think went with him a lot. But, oh, he made lots of trips to Austin trying to get money. I'm sure the man really worked many, many hours. And he was sort of like Cap Kidd, he didn't pay too much attention to my being there. /chuckles/ I don't remember that he ever even spoke to me, I guess he did.

C: Well, when they moved the campus to the new location, the Worrell's lived on campus in a house, didn't they?

M: Yes, I think so. But, you see, all of that happened, most of it, after I left. Because we just barely were in the three buildings that were there, and I think they moved downtown somewhere.

- C: Did they have any children, do you remember?
- M: They didn't have any here. Now, they might've have some grown children, I don't know. I think they sort of disappeared because I know when they tried to find something out about Mrs. Worrell. She was the one who thought up this Bhutanese architecture-- they couldn't find any trace of her. I took a lot of geology courses because it was allied with the science field and my professor was Mr. Pallister. I don't think he was here very long, maybe three or four years, and when they moved the Geology Department into the Main Building, it was on the second floor. Somebody, I suppose another university, sent bushels of fossils, unclassified. And Mr. Pallister told me if I would classify those fossils, that he'd give me an hour's credit. And you talk about getting into work [chuckles]. I practically lived in that place, because every fossil had to be checked according to pictures and descriptions. I didn't know there were so many kinds of gastropods in the world! [laughs] That was just a sidelight.
- R: Was there any sort of concern with the location of the campus being so close to the US-Mexican border, because this is the time that the Revolution is going on, do you know if there was any sort of concern?
- M: I think we did have a few scary moments, but most of those came before. I know when we first moved to El Paso in 1914 one night we could hear the shooting all night long in Juárez. It got pretty scary along about that time. And the biggest objection most of the students had to the new location was the fumes from the smelter. They were pretty bad sometimes,

I don't think they've conquered that yet. /Laughter/

R: No.

M: Do you still smell it?

R: On certain days.

M: And at that time they were doing a land office business.

Mr. Seamon always went to the smelter and got samples--four samples--that their chemists had tested and we had to run the tests and get the same results or we didn't pass the work. That was good training, but it was hard.

C: Now, when you came out here on the streetcar, then you had to get off the streetcar and walk.

M: Mesa Avenue. I still had about the same distance to walk as I did at Fort Bliss, it was very rocky and I remember I'd get so tired climbing the hill up to the streetcar in the afternoons. It was a long pull!

C: Did you ever get a ride in one of the cars?

M: With Cap Kidd, I'd watch and see if he was ready to leave. He'd always pick up anybody who was walking, and take them up to the streetcar. But, of course, I had to transfer when I got downtown. But everybody did it, you didn't think too much about it.

C: Did you go to school five days a week?

M: Yes.

C: Were the classes set up where you went daily or was it Monday, Wednesday and Friday classes?

M: Well, I went every day, I remember I went every day, especially in /my/ third year. I worked all afternoon. Of course, I had all that lab work to do in both geology and chemistry, and I had

no free time in the morning. And a lot of my classes were getting pretty hard. But all of my classmates were serious about learning, getting an education. They didn't fool around.

R: Do you see a difference in the way students have changed over the years?

M: Oh, yes, it's just pathetic. [Chuckles] No, they just don't settle down and really work. And I worked and never did flunk a course, I guess I was successful.

R: That's great! Do you remember any of the grades that you received?

M: Well I made all As in those three math courses, my freshman year, that helped my feelings, and I think I must've done pretty well in chemistry or Mr. Seamon wouldn't have put up with me. He had the reputation of being very strict and very hard, but it was a blessing. You know, unless you learn it right and do it right, it's no good.

C: So you stayed on campus all day, what did you do about lunch?

M: I think I had a little something I carried my lunch in, sort of like a thermos kit or something, I don't remember. We didn't brown-bag it like we do now. [laughter] They served food to the boys in the dorms, but not one time did they ever ask me to eat over there. I think that was their territory. And I didn't mind. Miss Ruth Augur was the Registrar and she was so sweet to me and so we used to sort of stay together, you know, ate together.

R: Was she the only female staff member?

M: She was the first year and then they began to get a few teachers, but the first year I think she was the only female. But it never

occurred to me to be apprehensive or scared or anything. Now I look back and think now and I'd hate to get off that Fort Bliss streetcar and walk through the entire camp like I did.

C: Do you remember attending any of the commencement ceremonies or pageants or parades on campus?

M: I don't think they ever had any.

C: They didn't?

M: [No.] The whole purpose, I mean everything aimed toward the new campus, toward getting some buildings, getting things started. And then of course, when all these people came in for the combination junior college and the School of Mines, then's when they hired the women teachers--and more men teachers too. But it was never successful, it was not a good arrangement at all. But I profited by it, I did my practice teaching at El Paso High School and the man who taught me in my practice teaching later became the head of the chemistry department at Mines.

C: So there were three buildings...

[END OF SIDE ONE]

M: ...now I believe [the one] that they use for geology was the chemistry building, that's where I did most of my work, and then, of course, there was Main building and the dorm. That was it.

C: Tell me some more about Lloyd Nelson.

M: Speedy? [chuckles]

C: Why did they call him Speedy?

M: I have no idea. [chuckles] [Maybe] because he was lanky and, he was [from] a Norwegian background. Did either one of you know him?

C: No.

R: No.

M: But he was desperately in love with my friend; she's still living. And they had one of the happiest, longest marriages. He died in 1967, I think it was.

C: Did you ever double date with them, with your girlfriend?

M: No, except to the church affairs. You know, we all went to the same church. But after he graduated in 1916, he went to work for a mining company up in New Mexico, so he really wasn't here very much. And the Wynns, [my friend's] parents were as strict as mine. And when she would go to the church affairs where she'd meet him, they knew she'd see him there, [so] they always sent her little brother along, to carry a lantern...

R: As a chaperone?

M: ...and see that she was properly checked on. [laughs]

C: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

M: I have three younger sisters and a brother. One of my sisters is here with me. She lives in Alamogordo and she and her husband drove down this morning. They're in the room next door. [laughter]

R: That's wonderful.

C: Well, did any of them attend the School of Mines?

M: No, my family moved to Central Texas. Of course, she's ten years younger than I am, and I'm the oldest of the four girls, and then I have a brother who is seven years younger than the youngest girl. He is a doctor. But no, I went to Breckenridge, I had a better offer than the money I was getting at El Paso High School. So my folks wanted me to come because that's where they were living and the idea of a booming oil town appealed to me. I thought that sounded like adventure. I wasn't going with

my soldier anymore. He wasn't a soldier either, he was out of the Army. And I met my husband a full month after I got there. He was auditor of the bank and a year later we married.

And this first day of November will be sixty-one years. He had a slight operation and couldn't come with me. But he's eighty-nine; I'm still a mere child. /_ laughter_7 I'll be eighty-four in December.

C: Thank you very much.

R: Yes, thank you very much.