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Interview no. 674

Roberta Walker

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Roberta R. Walker
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 31, 1983
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 674
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 674

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Joined the TWC faculty in 1948 in the Business Department;
later became a professor of English.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Early years at TWC; how she began teaching English; recollections of administrators, faculty and students; campus social life; comparison of students, past and present; memorable events in her teaching career.

NOTE: This transcript has been heavily edited by the interviewee.

Length of interview: 45 minutes Length of transcript: 13 pages

Roberta R. Walker
October 31, 1983
By Rebecca Craver
History of the University Project

C: When did you join the faculty?

W: I joined the faculty in 1948 in the Business Department.

C: What were you teaching?

W: I taught typewriting, primarily. As a part-time teacher, I taught two classes of typing each day, including Saturday classes. And they were big classes. Later, I taught beginning shorthand, letter writing and business report writing.

C: In what building?

W: Classes were in old Burges, up on the hill, what is now Graham Hall. I came here in 1948 in the fall, and then Don Freeland came in 1949. I remember Dr. Hartrick showing me a picture of a young male teacher saying, "This is the young man who is going to join us in the fall." It was Don. My first introduction to Don was through this picture. For several years Don and I shared a desk with Hans Brockmoller, a prominent attorney who was then teaching Business Law. Hans had an early morning class and really didn't use the desk very much. Don, Hans, and I each had one drawer in the desk (and we shared one chair). Now, if I grumble about lack of office space, I always remember sharing this one desk without a file cabinet or even a bookcase. In all, five of us shared this one office, so we were pretty much like sardines. In the 1950s the classes were quite large. I imagine the typing classes had 30 to 35 students, primarily returning veterans, who were

Roberta Walker

absolutely wonderful to have in class. They were so dedicated and so willing to learn. Some of them I remember very well. It seems to me in those early days that I got to know the students very well. I even knew students by their full names-- first name, middle and last. Today, I can hardly remember a student's name from semester to semester.

I had Ray Salazar in class, he became mayor of El Paso later on. I remember Ray very well because twice he came to me just before finals and said, Mrs. Walker, I may have to miss this final because my wife is pregnant and she may be having her baby at the time of finals." That at two different finals, but fortunately the baby either arrived earlier than the final or afterwards. Anyway, Ray didn't miss the exam. Another student I remember very well was George Ford Davis, now a C.P.A. in El Paso who was such a superior student. He sat very close to my desk, so we chatted a bit during the hour. He'd say to me, "I hate this class. I hate this class." But he sat there and worked and made an "A".

C: Well, when did you start teaching English?

W: I started teaching English after Dr. Hartrick was no longer the head and George Kaiser became head of the Business Department. He was one of our big mistakes along the way. Later on, Dr. Smiley released him for overstepping the boundaries of authority, and everyone in the department thought, "This is the day to break out the champagne." (Laughter) Well, about 1955 or 1956 George Kaiser came into the Business Department as a head, not as a chairman but as head, under very strange

Roberta Walker

circumstances. The president of the college--I believe he was Dr. Dysart Holcomb. The strange circumstance was that Kaiser had to be interviewed by every member of the department to determine if the faculty would accept him. I remember one of the instructors saying, "Well, when I go in for the interview, I'm going to ask him what brand of Scotch he drinks," and another one said, "Well, I'm going to ask him if he's a Baptist." (Chuckles) Kaiser resented having to be interviewed by the faculty and he made life extremely difficult for those instructors who had interviewed him. Many of them left very shortly afterwards. Only the instructors who had to stay in El Paso remained. There was a big teacher turnover after Kaiser came. One teacher had to resign because she was afraid to go to the ladies' restroom if Kaiser was in the hall; she was afraid she was going to have to speak to him. He was very unfeeling.

So, anyway, Kaiser told me during one registration, "Well, one of your classes didn't make. You're short a class. I'm either going to have to give you another class or I'm going to have to cut your salary." Well, I was making a very pitifully small amount at that time and there wasn't anything I could do but accept another class. When Kaiser went to tell the president that he had a teacher who was short a class, Dr. Sonnichsen was in the president's office at the same time saying, "I need another English teacher." So Sonnichsen telephoned and asked if I would teach English 3101, Beginning Freshman Composition. What could I do? Either that or take a

salary cut, so I said, Yes, I'll teach it." Doc said, "Come by my office, pick up the textbooks and meet the class at 8 o'clock, tomorrow morning." And that's the way I got into English.

I went to Sonnichsen's office and I picked up three textbooks I had never, never seen before--and then had to get ready to meet the English class the next morning at 8 o'clock. Well, I stayed up almost all night trying to find out what was inside those three books. Never did I work so hard in my life as I did that semester trying learn those textbooks, trying to keep a day or two ahead of the class. I felt very sorry for that particular class because I was their fourth teacher. Because the students had been shuffled from room to room and from teacher to teacher, they were pretty disgusted and worn out by the time I arrived. They looked at me wondering how long I was going to last. We started out in a classroom in Cotton Memorial. One morning when I arrived, I discovered that one of those huge fluorescent light fixtures had smashed down in the middle of the night on the desks. Since we couldn't use that room, I asked permission to take the students to my typing room in Burges. Such a move made teaching easier for me because the room was near my office. So the students sat at the typewriter tables and did their composition work the rest of the semester. I have often thought how lucky we were that the class was not in session when the light fixture fell.

C: Well, tell me about your experiences with Hartrick.

W: Dr. Hartrick, of course, was my first employer here. He was

Roberta Walker

extremely considerate, but he wanted things done in a very meticulous fashion. He was very particular about the minutest details of the department and our offices. We had to report to him any kind of irregularity in the classroom. We didn't have air conditioning in those dark ages, so each office had a rotary fan. We all received little memos asking us to put 10 drops of oil each month in motors of the fans. (Laughter) Since we didn't have air conditioning, we had to keep our windows open; and because the college had a stable not too far away, the fly problem was bad. So we had another memo offering us fly paper if we needed it. (Laughter) One time he appointed Professor John Spencer and me to check the building for needed repairs and to count the number of cracks on the interior and exterior of the building. (Laughter)

C: Well, didn't y'all just laugh about it behind his back a lot?

W: Well, yes we did laugh behind his back quite a bit, but there was nothing wrong with the memos. The male members of the faculty resented the memos about the flypaper and the 10 drops of oil, but the women took it good naturedly. They understood Dr. Hartrick's problems.

C: Well, what other women were on campus?

W: What other women were in the Business Department? Florence Buckner was teaching Accounting, Lelah Black was teaching secretarial subjects; she was in charge of the Secretarial Science. Stella Smith was teaching business subjects and accounting at that time.

C: And how were the women treated, do you think?

Roberta Walker

W: How were the women treated? They were expected to assume about the same teaching responsibilities and duties as the men were. Of course the men were generally expected to do the heavy physical work, while the women were usually asked to supervise the social projects. And there was a great deal of socializing in the early days. Various departments gave parties at least once a semester in the Union. These parties meant having punch and cookies around 4 o'clock. I remember I was always asked to help with the decorating, getting flowers, issuing invitations, and serving.

C: Well, these coffees over there, would one department host it?

W: Yes. One department would host a party, maybe once a semester. The History Department would have one, the English Department would have one, and the Business Department would have another little get together.

C: What about off-campus? Were there parties for the faculty?

W: I can't recall too many off-campus parties except after the women's group, the Faculty Women's Club, was organized. Then we had parties off-campus.

C: Well, you've really seen the school grow; it really grew in the fifties and sixties.

W: Yes, it did. When I first came, I could drive on campus and park anyplace, just anyplace. If I were in Burges Hall and I wanted to go to the library, I could drive over and park right in front of the Library. There was no parking problem at all. At that time we had only one policeman, one traffic officer. His name was Cound, I believe, a sort of a jolly little Santa

Roberta Walker

Claus, a rotund little man with a white goatee. But imagine, one policeman for the entire campus! He was a sweet old fellow; everybody liked him. He did his patrolling of the buildings and campus on foot.

C: Well, they didn't have parking stickers then.

W: No, we didn't have parking stickers.

C: So the students could come on.

W: And the students could come on campus, with faculty--first come, first parked. We never had any trouble with parking. I recall that Paul Hassler was always head of the traffic Committee. Perhaps he still is. And when we first got parking permits, they were only 35 cents. And now what are they--\$10? \$15 dollars? Something like that.

C: Well, somebody told me that sororities and fraternities ran the school in the fifties.

W: Yes, the sororities and the fraternities were very active in the fifties. There were sorority houses; I think there were three where the parking lot for the Union is. There was a street that came straight down from the Education Building, and along it were three nice little houses, and then we had the Zeta house near the Administration Building. Sororities were extremely active then. I remember the Tri Deltas and Zetas were always active doing something on campus. They frequently had progressive lunches for the faculty. How much fun they were! The instructors would go to one house for an appetizer, another house for a salad, another house for an entree, another house for dessert. Those progressive luncheons were always something

Roberta Walker

the faculty looked forward to. But then the faculty grew too large for that sort of thing.

C: Were there dances, student dances?

W: Yes. There seemed to be student dances all the time, and they were generally beautiful affairs. They were fun to go to, fun not only for the students but fun for the faculty too.

C: So most of the faculty would attend?

W: And a few of the faculty would attend, yes.

C: Were they in the gym or where?

W: I don't remember any in the gym; they were generally in the ballroom of the Union.

C: Formals?

W: Formals, with the girls in long dresses with lovely corsages. And the fraternities gave big balls, formal balls; the men in tuxedos and the girls in their beautiful Miss Day ball gowns.

C: Well, members of the faculty, did they have to chaperone?

W: Occasionally the faculty was asked to chaperone.

C: Well, when did all that stop?

W: I think in the sixties. All of a sudden it became very uncool to have the long dresses and the big bands and the formal parties. They just stopped.

C: Do you remember any anti-war demonstrations in the sixties?

W: I remember one episode here on campus. I was in the Union and looking out; I could see a crowd of students around the Administration Building. I also could see the armed guards that had come from Austin to protect property, but nothing happened; the crowd dispersed. Another time I remember looking

Roberta Walker

out my office window and seeing a group of students marching up the street, chanting and carrying banners and things, but it was only a very small group, just a very small number of the students. And I do think that most of the demonstrations were instigated by street people. I don't feel they were really started by students, but by outside agitators. Judson Williams, I believe was the mayor then, had his car pushed around, but that perhaps was about the only incident. But these disturbances didn't last but a day or two. However, we did have armed patrols that came in from the University System.

C: Back in the late forties and early fifties, did the administration here in the college stand behind the teachers more?

W: Yes. The administration stood behind the teachers. The heads of the departments (they had more power than chairpersons have now), stood behind the teachers. We had a strong student discipline committee, too, and a very strong dean in Dr. Anton Berkman. He was a very, very superior administrator, and a very considerate person. He knew the catalog regulations backwards and forward. He could answer any question anyone ever needed to know about any of the regulations or procedures. He was always extremely helpful. One time he said to me, "I know you have an alcoholic in your class." (This student was a returning veteran, an alcoholic, and everyone was much aware of his condition.) "You do not have to have this person in your class unless you so choose. I will remove him if he causes you any trouble." And I answered, "No, he isn't causing me any

Roberta Walker

trouble but I am very much concerned about his health. It may be better for him to stay in class than to have him removed." The dean agreed.

The administration would stand behind a teacher, say, in questions of cheating or plagiarism. Now, it's extremely difficult, even when you know a student is plagiarizing, to do anything. You're not supposed to use the word "plagiarism" with students; you're not to use the word "cheating" in front of them either. You can't say to a student, "You are cheating."

C: What kind of committee work do you remember?

W: Well, under Dr. Hartrick we had a great many different committees. We had a social committee, as I said. Then one of the committees that I was on that always amused me and it never bothered me to think that I was the chairman, but Dr. Hartrick wanted me to be chairperson of the ladies restroom. The Business Department was in old Burges Hall and the ladies restroom was really not the greatest place in the world. But Dr. Hartrick was interested in having it maintained properly and seeing that it was cleaned adequately. Then in the English Department, under Dr. Sonnichsen, I can't remember that we had standing committees, but we had many ad hoc committees to, say, set up new procedures or investigate a particular problem. But now, at least in the English Department we have a written statement of departmental procedures and a great many standing committees.

C: Tell me about some of these fights within the English

Roberta Walker

Department.

W: Fights within the English Department?

C: There was a time when some of them wanted to make their classes larger and larger and there was this uprising to keep them small. Do you recall any fights?

W: Right now, I don't seem to recall any serious disagreements. English is a large department. There are at least 40 or 50 fulltime professors, and there are many part-time teachers. In any large departments there will be little cliques that will band together, but I think most of the disagreements are primarily academic and really don't interfere with the running of the department or the organization of classes.

C: What other personalities stand out in your mind besides Dean Hartrick? You worked with Dr. Sonnichsen. Can you think of any other people? And how would you describe them, like Sonnichsen?

W: Well, Dr. Sonnichsen was a head, and in some ways having a head is much easier for an instructor than having a chair. And Doc was a such a darling to work with. He was considerate and always on top of everything. He knew what was going on although he did have a few requirements and regulations that he wanted applied and expected, that teachers would follow. For one, Sonnichsen asked instructors to mark and return student compositions at the next class following their submission. Another was that students who received a "D" or an "F" on a theme had to confer with the instructor. Doc was the first one who tried to establish a common examination and common grading

Roberta Walker

procedures for freshman classes. I remember that for one final we met to do common grading in the ballroom of the Union; we had established an arithmetic sheet so that we could give a numerical grade for the final exam compositions. That method of grading didn't last for very long, but it was an attempt to have some standardizations.

C: What's been your greatest thrill with your career here?

W: Well, almost every class has been a thrill. So it is extremely difficult for me to pinpoint either a year or a class or a moment that was the absolute great thrill. But at the 1968 Commencement I was really startled and surprised when Dr. Joe Ray announced that I was one of the four instructors to receive the Excellence in Teaching award. That honor came as a total, complete surprise and was really a very, very great thrill.

Another very thrilling moment also came in 1968, but later in the year. I had just arrived home from a vacation in Hawaii. I had just...just got home from this trip when the telephone rang; it was Dean Ray Small. He said, "I want to congratulate you. You've been promoted to Assistant Professor." I nearly collapsed from excitement. The promotion was so unexpected, so unbelievable. I thought Dean Small was dear to call me and to tell me. I was squealing. I was so happy and excited over the promotion I remember saying to Mike and Dickie (my son and my daughter-in-law were with me, I think they had met me at the airport), "Well, this is the day that we break out the champagne."

In 1981 I received another award, the AMOCO Award for

Roberta Walker

excellence in teaching. And in 1982 I was promoted after my retirement to Associate Professor Emerita--still greater thrills. Then at retirement, five close friends in the English Department with my son and daughter-in-law gave me a beautiful, totally fantastic banquet at the El Paso Country Club on April 17. This wonderful party was an unexpected, unforgettable thrill. Certainly the banquet made a grand way to begin a new career.

C: And your new career. Just tell me about the book.

W: My new career is being retired and enjoying myself. Last week Bob Esch and I received the second edition of our book The Art of Styling Sentences, which will be in the bookstore very shortly. It has been revised and considerably enlarged, and we're extremely pleased with it. What you see here on the table and on these shelves is the manuscript of our second book, The Art of Styling Paragraphs. We have the text finished except for inserting examples, making an index, and really getting the parts put together. But the text is finished.

C: So, you're busy.

W: We are working against a deadline.

END OF INTERVIEW