

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University

Norma Laughner Interview

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Interviewed by Brady Crytzer

Transcribed by Annamae Mayer

Proofread and edited by Mark O'Connor and Judy Silva

Reviewed and approved by Norma Laughner

BC: Explain your affiliation with the university.

NL: Well it's been a long affiliation. I was born and reared in Slippery Rock. One of those rare birds. And so I grew up just taking the college for granted. It was just part of the atmosphere and the environment. And my father always took me to the football games, even when I was a little kid we'd come up to the football game. And he never sat down he always stood along the sidelines. And my mother worked here for many years, she was one of the people in the laundry actually. So the college was part of our family life. And it was always assumed that I would go to Slippery Rock. That was just taken for granted that [pause], that would be where I would go to school for higher education. And I did, in 1944, which was a very low [enrollment] year for Slippery Rock. The college was very, very tiny, like we had maybe 350 some students on campus. And our freshman class was just very, very low. We had two boys in our freshman class. Joe Funfur and "Hose" Barkley I think were their names. Oh dear. But the second semester I was here it began to grow.

We got seven men, or nine men altogether. So Coach [N. Kerr] Thompson thought he better have a football, or a baseball, basketball team. He had enough men he was gonna play basketball, so we had a lot of fun with that. And mostly girls in their bobby socks and their swirl skirts and we had a good time. But then came the deluge of men from World War II and that was wild. Those fellows really put us on our merit. We just from there on had a good time for two years and all of a sudden boom, uh 19 . . . I guess it was '46 it was the big bulge and [pause], you really had to work for your grades then because those guys were in there to get an education and to get out. My husband only spent like three years here and he had a full degree because he would just take extra classes. And I got out a semester early too 'cause I read the writing on the wall and had to speed up, but that was my experience as a student here.

But [pause] when we came back from Pittsburgh where Carl was teaching and I was teaching at Coraopolis. We came back to Slippery Rock in '55 and Dr. [Carle] Spotts had put in a word for Carl when they needed good teachers. So we came back to Slippery Rock and for four years I was a housewife raising children and I decided I better get to work too because I was losing it; you know you kind of get used to talking baby talk. So I went up and I heard of a job that was opened because one of the teachers had run her car under a flat bed and was very badly hurt. She was in the speech field, which I was too. And in those days to be a speech teacher you had to have experience in the public schools because it was a teachers college back then. So I had had Coraopolis training in my field. So that stood me in good stead. So I was hired.

Dr. [Norman] Weisenfluh took me on and [pause] I had ten years, ten good years at Slippery Rock as a speech instructor. And I had a full complement of classes but of course not the pay, but I got the work and it was great. And I loved the kids, I loved the students. But there came a

time when things got a little bit hairy for me and my kids were growing up and needed me and we were going hither and yon for all kinds of things. I decided it was time to wrap it up. Ten years was enough.

But during that ten years there were a lot of changes in Slippery Rock because it was the 'sixties and one of the things that I remember especially was the morning I had a full schedule on for demonstration speeches and I had three people show up for class and I said, "What's going on here? Where is the rest of this class?" And here there was a demonstration around Old Main for women's rights and oh, just to lower all the codes they had around the school for various things. You couldn't be out after midnight ya know and the boys couldn't be around the girl's dorms. Oh there were just a lot of things that were real stipulations when you came to Slippery Rock and the kids did not like that anymore, this was freedom days in the 'sixties. So they were out there demonstrating and I said "Oh," and the next day there was about seven in class and I thought, "Well the worst of it may be over." And they had the *Pittsburgh Press* up here; everybody was here photographing, building it up like it was a big deal they were demonstrating but they were demonstrating all over the country, in those days that's what you did.

BC: We have listed the three eras of Slippery Rock; do you remember the transitions between those periods?

NL: Yes, it was a teachers college when I was a student and when I started to teach it was still a teachers college. But during that ten years it changed to a state college and I think they had to bring in like the nursing school and maybe the ROTC [or] something. You had to have various education fields rather than just teaching to become a state college, as I remember. But it was a great day. I remember they had a little celebration about turning into a state college and they put up a stone kind of a marker out at Kiester Road there saying this is a state college, Slippery Rock State College, and we never saw "teachers college" again down on the main streets. We were a state college and things did change and they were working towards university status and you could tell things were changing pretty fast. And that's one of the other reasons that I retired after ten years because I would have had to have go back and get my doctorate, and at my age I wasn't willing to do that. And they were trying to upgrade the whole system in order to get to university status. And all the teachers had to look to their degrees and see what they could do to upgrade themselves. It was rather interesting.

BC: You mentioned your department—do you remember any changes your department went through specifically during this period?

NL: We moved around. We went from Old Main into the Headland House and then over into West Gym. We had offices in West Gym. We had [pause], I think Dr. Irv Kuhr as the last head of our department that I worked under. And he was very knowledgeable. We had Dr. Ted Walwik, who was a good man. We had very good teachers. They were all, you know, very good in the field. But it was changing into more of a communications field rather than just straight speech. Lecturing type speech for classrooms, it was changing more into, well the modern age I'd say with the television and various electronic things coming in, I think that the head changed, and it did.

BC: Was the department supportive of the change?

NL: Well I don't think I was there when it really changed a lot. I was gone I think by that time. We just accepted whatever came; it wasn't that big of a deal to us.

BC: What buildings did you work in when you worked here?

NL: Well those were the buildings. Old Main, third floor Old Main was the speech area. And Headland House was just a temporary thing. While they were building the new classrooms and there were several being built in the 'sixties. And then we went over into West Gym and we took over West Gym first and second floors. We were on the second floors for offices and we had nice offices up there even though it was small. We worked together very well and then we had our classrooms downstairs.

BC: So they were adequate for the times?

NL: For the times it wasn't bad at all. We didn't have huge . . . we had big classes but we didn't have huge classes. Like they did at Penn State and some of the other places we heard about when the voice came back it was pretty horrendous. But we had adequate space for classrooms I think for a while. But it was beginning to bulge when they got the new classrooms buildings in Spotts and down on the lower campus.

BC: What was your first impression from being on the outside to being a student on campus? Was it different?

NL: Oh yes, yes it was. Because I was a "townie." We actually were called "townies" and we had a room underneath Old Main that the townies met in and could socialize and eat their lunch or whatever they wanted to do. But it was hard to break into the cliques that were established in the actual college itself. And it took me a while to make friends with some of the ones who lived in the dorms. And once you did, I mean, once you were accepted by the people in the dorms then it was the best of both worlds. But for a while there when you were a freshman you thought, "Oh am I ever gonna get to do what these girls are doing?" Cause it was altogether a different kind of a life. And yet I had no restrictions and they had all these ten o'clocks and twelve o'clocks and all these restrictions that [were] not placed on me by my family.

BC: So you lived at home? It was not mandatory to live in the dorms?

NL: I lived on Elm Street. Oh no, no, no never. In fact there were houses around who just took woman students. One right directly across from Old Main, [the] woman took only female students. A woman who lived across the street from us on Elm Street took only women students. And some took only men; my aunt on Elm Street took male students in her third floor. It was rather interesting when there weren't enough rooms up here. You had students all over town.

BC: What changes did you see for the better or the worse?

NL: Right. Oh yeah. In fact I worked on a committee with Maggie Meise and Marie McKay. That was one of the things I did when I was teaching. I worked on the committee to save the Chapel, because it was such a beautiful building and it had such good memories for everybody in town. We had our first movie theatre [that] was in the Chapel and we would go up to that when

we were just kids and we would sneak in; things like that. And all those memories. And we had vespers, still had vespers when I was a freshman.

That meant you had to come to Sunday night service so many times a month I think it was. And I sang in the choir, I always was a singer. So I sang in the vesper choir, and it was no chore for me, and that's how I met my husband. He saw me coming out of vesper choir and hailed me one night and that was a long story. But that, yeah, we had "save the Chapel" and the big alumni push, we wanted to keep that building so badly. But they found with a state inspection that there were termites, it was just termite-ridden I guess and it was not safe. That was the story anyhow, we never quite believed it, but that was the story and they didn't want to save the Chapel. And they came and looked at it many times but no, we sent out mailings and we tried to get people to rally around but there weren't that many alumni who were interested really in that. We sent one mailing after another to them but couldn't get that Chapel saved, so it's gone. They used to have lovely ceremonies with their graduations. They would walk up the Long Walk, all the teachers in their robes and so forth, walk up the Long Walk into the Chapel. And that was just kind of something that lingers in your mind.

BC: Any talk or attempt to rebuild it? Did they say it was going to be a parking lot?

NL: They told us all kinds of stories. There was going to be a little chapel built in the middle of the lower campus that was to be bricks from the old chapel and the stained glass windows were saved; well they were actually saved and we've used them you know, in the alumni section of the union. That one room that you go into, it's like a reception room, before you went to the university union. Those stained glass windows are all from the old Chapel and in the alumni house they have the old windows from the Chapel. So a few things were saved, wasn't like saving the building, but it was something.

Let's see, what else? Was there anything else? But that was the one I was most involved with because I was secretary for the alumni for twenty-three years. Maggie Meise was the treasurer and Marie McKay was our staunch registrar. Knew every student by name, could tell you what they had done and knew if you needed a few more credits to graduate, she could tell you everything. She was a great girl, Marie McKay.

BC: Campus activities you were involved in? Obviously the Chapel

NL: Yeah, alumni and vesper choir I was always in as a student but even later I sang with them. Let's see. They wanted me to chaperone a sorority when I was teaching but I had too many things on the docket. I went over and talked to Dr. Weisenfluh and he said, "Oh that's alright. We'll find somebody." He was a great guy.

BC: What do you consider your accomplishments as a student and as a teacher at Slippery Rock?

NL: It gave me a great base because as a . . . even in the elementary and secondary school we had teachers from the college teaching us. They were affiliated both places so we would have people who taught history over here come and teach history in high school, English over here teach English in high school. A lot of them traveled back and forth. My education, I must say, was an excellent education. I didn't always take advantage of it the way I should, but I was in the upper fifth in the class so I felt like I had done something in high school. Well then in college I

knew all of those teachers, so that was a nice start too. I could talk with them if I needed counseling. Matilda Bailey was a great help to me. I was in English and Matilda Bailey was a great help. Dr. Spotts was a wonderful help. And I think that probably when I went to Pitt [the University of Pittsburgh] I had no trouble at all at Pitt and I kind of just breezed through courses there and I just felt it was because my Slippery Rock training was really good.

BC: Specific memories of Matilda Bailey?

NL: Oh yes, they're both dead, so I can talk about them. Oh dear. This one boy, who went into the service, never graduated. Went into the service when he was a junior I think, I don't know how he did that, but he was asleep in class one day and Matilda came in and he was snoring away and [pause] classes changed and he was still snoring away. And Matilda said, "Shh, just come in quietly." We all just tip-toed in ya know, and Howard was sitting there and he woke up about two-thirds of the way through the class and he did have a fit. And Matilda said, "Now you see what happens to people who sleep through class." Oh, she was a real wonderful person.

BC: What did she teach?

NL: She was an English teacher. And she wrote a great textbook too. Yeah, she was a writer and made a name for herself. And she came back here as a dollar-a-year person for a while just because she liked Slippery Rock and because they needed somebody. She said I'll come back and took a "buck" a year. She didn't need the money, she was a published author by that time. Wonderful person. We had pulled some good people in during her time too. Vincent Price [the film actor]; I remember we went to dinner one day with Vincent Price. She and the speech department had helped to get him on campus so I was invited as a speech teacher. And it was very interesting. He was quite a man.

BC: Did you go somewhere local to eat?

NL: Oh we were in Weisenfluh.

BC: As a teacher, best or worst moments?

NL: I think I told you the one where I only had three people in class one day. That was one of the worst things that I think happened to me.

BC: Did you still teach that class?

NL: No! I didn't even try. Because when you give a demonstration speech you have to have an audience you know, and you have to have feedback. And you couldn't tell with two other people in class what kind of speech you were getting or what kind of feedback you had so I said "Just go home and meet tomorrow." And then there were seven so we had class with seven. I'm trying to think, I think just seeing my students do so well. And I kept in touch with many of them after they left. I think just knowing they were doing so well made me feel good.

BC: How many presidents were you here for? Who were they, and do you remember anything about their personalities?

NL: Dr. [Dale] Houk and his family were here when I was a freshman. [Pause] we had . . . in those days you had to go down a reception line, when you were a freshman and meet all the faculty and the president's wife; everybody was in long dresses and tuxedos, and we were in long dresses. It was a very formal affair, formal occasion. And Dr. Houk was very, very nice to everybody. He was always very receptive to the students. And his family—he had a nice family. Dr. [John] Entz I remember a little better because I was still in high school but he was traveling around here with his little dog, cutest little dog, and everybody would stop and talk with Dr. Entz. And he was really a remarkable man, but he only stayed a few years and was getting older. They took him because they needed somebody right after the war I guess it was; yeah, must have been. And they needed somebody that could hold the place together and start building. He did exactly that; he was a very fine man.

Then we got Dr. Houk, and he started building all the classroom buildings and things like that. He was a good man. But I don't remember, I didn't know Dr. [Dale] McMasters who was the one who committed suicide. And we understood that he had agromeglia, that his brain and his bones were growing and causing him terrible pain and misery. But I didn't really know him. [Pause] let's see, who else? Dr. Weisenfluh who hired me and mentored me actually. When I graduated there were only thirteen of us [who] graduated in January '48. Because we came in here with that little class, so there were thirteen of us, and I was the first one I think to get a job. Dr. Weisenfluh pulled me into his office over in the lab school and he said, "I have a job down in Coraopolis and it's for English; do you want an interview?" And I said, "I sure do." And I toured down there and interviewed and I had that job. And I'm sure because of his mentoring and his advice that helped a lot to get there, of course; I think seven of the other ones got jobs too of that class of thirteen. So we were off and away.

The one sorrowful thing though was one of our classmates went back, was called back to the service for Korea, and he was in the underwater, I don't know what it's called, I can't think of the name of it. But he was in the demolition, the people who went underwater and planted bombs and picked up bombs. And he was killed with just a couple months; he went in right after his graduation and it was a bad time for all of us 'cause we all knew him very well.

Let's see, Dr. Weisenfluh, I'm trying to think. There were a lot, I knew all the presidents of course because I lived here and we always, Carl and I always came up to campus to the events and activities even after we retired. And so we knew from the Alumni Association and our contacts that way all of the presidents to some degree.

BC: Was Dr. [Albert] Watrel in the '70s?

NL: Dr. Watrel, yes, he worked really well with the alumni. But what did him [in] as I understand is that little press lodge [Gail Rose Lodge] at the football field. He just was a great guy for sports 'cause he had been a coach—Watrel had been a coach. He had a lovely wife Carol. But anyhow, we understood through the alumni that he was putting a little bit more money into sports than he should. He was giving a few scholarships that weren't clicking or something, but when he built the press box that was the last straw.

BC: Oh, that was him that put that up on the hill?

NL: Yeah, Harrisburg decided, well that's pushing the button a little too far.

BC: Movers and shakers on campus that you gravitated towards.

NL: Oh, well, in our department Jan Burns, she just was the greatest teacher in our department, when I was a student and [pause] she actually lent us her apartment one summer, the summer we got married she gave us her apartment cause she was going on vacation for three months and said you can live in my apartment so we did. But let's see, Doc Spotts, I would say, was one of the really good English teachers on campus. And he wrote a textbook also which Carl and I edited and had our names in. That was nice, but he moved over to Ohio then and took a better job in Ohio, but he was a very fine teacher. But we had [pause] a music teacher, Gladys Arnold; George Miller an art teacher, very good. People, and the teachers in those days knew all the students, when I was in school, they knew all the students. So they would have family gatherings for us. Invite you to their homes in the evening, and you would sit around the fireplace and talk, you know about all kinds of things.

And that, I don't know, movers and shakers . . . I don't know, I think probably, Carl did a lot for the Alumni Association and knew everybody. He made a point of knowing everyone. And Cliff Underwood, who followed him, was good, but he spent a little too much money that he didn't have and we had to get rid of him. But let's see, I think Sally Lennox really did an awful lot for the Alumni Association. She insisted on building a house for the alumni and she knew how to press the buttons and the right people to call and she didn't mind talking money and she was a really good person for that job at that time. And we got our [alumni] house and we got a lot of work done for the alumni even though she pushed the wrong buttons also. But you know when you're a mover and a shaker you often make enemies and that's just the way it worked. She made a few enemies because she fought the administration a little bit and she got relieved of her duties.

BC: Any other influences?

NL: Yeah, sure, yeah, Gladys Arnold actually gave me personal instruction in vocal exercising and that kind of thing when I was singing and wouldn't take a dime for it, I mean she just did it because she was a teacher here and she knew I liked to sing. And Gladys Sanderson, who wasn't even a faculty member, she was on the staff. She was the college organist when I was here and growing up. And she was also the organist for our church choir and I sang with the church choir starting when I was fourteen. And she mentored me the whole way along, just wouldn't give up. She had me singing when I was fifty-something, oh gee, with another girl from New Castle and she just was a fine woman and somebody you could really look up to and appreciate. Gladys Sanderson, Jan Burns in the speech department was a big help to me and Doc Spotts, Dr. Weisenfluh, oh there were just so many. Ya know, they were all very good people and very helpful.

BC: Major events or activities while you were here, like new buildings?

NL: I don't know [pause], I think when the classroom buildings were starting to be built that was kind of traumatic and being named ya know, for different people, that was nice. Eisenberg and Spotts, and the one Vincent, A.P. Vincent Science Hall, that was I think one of the nicest

buildings that they built during that quick building era. And they would have planetarium shows and invite the community to come to those and that was a big deal because people were invited onto the campus and before it was kind of a separate thing. And the library helped a lot too because they invited people to come use the library.

BC: This library [Bailey Library]?

NL: Yes, this library, Maltby was not a community library to any degree that I remember. It was students and teachers that used Maltby. But this library always welcomed the community and we didn't have a Slippery Rock library then. We do now, not much of a one but it's growing, but because of that I think a lot of people felt good about coming to campus. And then they started having concerts and Blase Scarnati did a lot of that community building with his concerts and, let's see, I remember the Miller Auditorium when that was built. Emma Guffey Miller came to Slippery Rock; they had conferences and Emma Guffey was a power in Harrisburg so we got it named for her, Miller Auditorium. And [pause] it was wonderful to do plays and things in the speech department. We had a good time with that. There were some shortcomings to it, but so much better than where we used to do plays which was under the Maltby Library, the theatre. It was so tiny. But we did some really nice productions under there in spite of the fact it was small. I don't know what they are using it for now really, I think they did do some plays.

BC: Yes, there are still seats and a stage in there.

NL: Yeah? I haven't been down there for a long time. But that's good they are using it because it was more of a comfortable setting in the small theatre. You could do things in there that they are trying to do in Miller [Auditorium] now by sectioning off for those in the round plays. Those are good, but I mean you don't feel like you're in a small theatre, you just feel like you're in a big theatre that's sectioned off. At least I do. I haven't been to many of them, but that's how I feel about them.

BC: What do you miss the most about being here on a daily basis?

NL: Well I think, I would say the communication with the students is the thing I miss the most. Although, we do in our church adopt students and I've always had adopted students in my life in our church in Slippery Rock. At one time I had nine students; we had to sit across the whole front pew. And that was nice, we would take out to, or they would come home to dinner really, and we would take them out shopping for different things that they needed and it was just a nice cooperative development when you left the school to keep in touch with kids. Let's see, I never missed the activities because we still lived in Slippery Rock, we retired in Slippery Rock out on New Castle Street. And we still kept in touch with the college things that were going on and we'd always come up to the activities. So I didn't really miss a whole lot. We always came to football games. We never sat in the press box. We always had our seat at the top of the fifty yard line there.

BC: Other things you would want current or future Rock community members to know, and how would you like to be remembered?

NL: Well, it's a great place, I think, to send your kids. Now they were saying, ya know, they're getting the cream of the crop from high schools now. But I always thought they did, I always

thought our kids were the cream of the crop. But I would recommend Slippery Rock, and I do, to parents who have students in high school who are looking. And I think it's financially reasonable compared with other schools, and I think the instructors or professors are really for the most part better than they ever were and that speaks well for the accreditation committees and those people who are trying to raise the standards. They are trying to get more doctorates which may or may not be the idea, but I think it's a good school and I think it's getting better for the ones who have graduated because the name is getting known better and it's a good name.

And there's been nothing really except that stupid thing about it being a party school five years ago, there has been nothing to degrade it. And I think it's a good school, wouldn't hesitate to recommend it; it has a lot of potential. I think this [pause] equestrian center [Storm Harbor Equestrian Center] is a step in the right direction too because of the number [of] handicapped children. Seems to be a lot of that around, or maybe you just hear about it now. It's a new step, in the right direction for our society. I think Slippery Rock is trying to stay on top of things. I enjoy talking about Slippery Rock because it's my home and it's a great school.